

EMINENT TELUGU SCHOLARS  
AND  
OTHER ESSAYS

By

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## KANUPARTI VARALAKSHMAMMA (1896-1978): A Writer With A Purpose And A Pioneer In Women's Movement

Varalakshamma was an avid social activist, active participant in Gandhian movement, a social conscious writer and a great speaker. She was born on October 6<sup>th</sup>, 1886. Her parents were Palaparthi Seshayya and Hanumayamma. She had seven siblings—five brothers and two sisters. She was married in 1909 to Kanuparthi Hanumantha Rao, an educated and sophisticated gentleman and health inspector by profession. He supported Varalakshamma's activities wholeheartedly.

In the history of India, it was a crucial time. The country, inspired by Gandhi, was fighting for freedom from the British rule. The state of Andhra Pradesh was sizzling with the nationalist spirit and the social movements advocated by Veeresalingam.

Varalakshamma threw in her lot with these political and social movements at an early age. She worked towards not only improving the living conditions for women but also encouraging them actively to participate in these movements. She traveled around the country to promote the ideals she believed in.

Varalakshamma's father and brothers encouraged her to read ever since she was a child. One of the contributory factors in her writing was her neighbors. As the story goes, there were some illiterate older women in her neighborhood who migrated from Maharashtra. They used to ask Varalakshamma to read the letters they had received from their relatives back home and then ask her to write replies to those letters. They would often tell their thoughts in their own clumsy way and Varalakshamma took it upon herself to think through and put them in a cogent manner. She was in 3<sup>rd</sup> grade at the time. This practice of reorganizing the thoughts helped her to develop a series column, *sarada lekhalu*, in her later years (which will be discussed later.).

Since her childhood, she was interested in reading. Her father and brothers played a significant role in developing her writing skills. She wrote her first story 1919 at the suggestion of her brother Anjaneyulu, who had read an English story to her and asked her to write it in Telugu. With great determination, she finished it. It was published in *anasuya* monthly under the pseudonym 'Saudamini'. Although it was written after reading an English story, it read like a Telugu original.

After publishing her first story, she continued to write. Her next significant contribution was a feature column *maa chettuneeda mucchatlu* [Chitchat in the shade of our tree] in *Andhra patrika* weekly under the pseudonym Leelavati. In the column, Varalakshamma discussed important issues such as education for women, traditions, politics, modern trends and many more.

The column ran for six years. In 1928, the same management started another magazine, *gruhalakshmi*, in which Varalakshamma was invited to write regularly. She started another column, *Sarada lekhalu* [Letters from Sarada] under another pseudonym Sarada. The letters were addressed to an imaginary friend, Kalpalata. In these letters, Varalakshamma discussed potent issues such as Sharda Act, divorce law, *khadi* movement, non-cooperation, erasing

untouchability, unfounded customs, physical exercise, the changes implemented in measurements and weights, microphones and many more. The list is sufficient to show the diversity in the topics she was writing about. The *Sarada lekhalu* set a new standard in the genre of letter-writing in Telugu literature. It is a milestone.

Varalakshamma wrote poetry, stories, novels, and plays. Her writings were broadcast on All India Radio and doordarshan (Indian TV). She participated in literary meets with high-ranking poets of our time and sometimes she was the only woman writer in a given meet. She was also a powerful orator. Because of her husband's job as health inspector, they moved to several towns and that helped her to develop contacts in several places and deliver inspiring speeches.

Some of her stories that received critical acclaim are *penshanu puccukunna naati raatri* [The night after retirement], *katha etla undaale* [How a story should be?], *kuteeralakshmi* [The Goddess in a Cottage], and *aidu maasamula iruvadi dinamulu* [Five months and twenty days].

In *penshanu puccukunna naati raatri*, the author describes the mental state of a couple after the husband retired. The author describes their mental state—a sense of despair, depression, apathy, and fear of future without income—in a manner that brings about empathy in the readers, says Polapragada Rajyalakshmi, a veteran writer and close friend of Varalakshamma.

In *kuteeralakshmi*, Varalakshamma depicts the ruination of cottage industries as a result of the economic devastation following the First World War. It was published in *Andhra Patrika* Ugadi issue, 1924.

The protagonist's (Ramalakshmi's) husband started a dyeing clothes business on a large scale and was successful until the Second World War caused the country to collapse economically. He lost everything and died. After his death, Ramalakshmi had to start all over again to feed her two little children. At first she took several odd jobs and later, started working on the spinning wheel to make a living. The story ended with a sad note that the protagonist never got a chance at good living.

Sad as it sounds, that has been the reality in India. The small farmer, the small business, the mom-and-pop store round the corner took a downward turn and never recovered as India kept moving towards modernization.

Varalakshamma's first novel *vasumati* was published in 1925. In her preface, she stated that she was 14 when she heard a woman narrate her heartbreaking story to her (Varalakshamma's) mother. After a couple of years, she wrote it and threw it into a box. After eight years, she pulled it out in the hope of publishing it. However, she noticed that some of the pages were worn out, and some were stained by medicines and oils. Varalakshamma decided to rewrite the missing pages and publish it. Thus she would consider the novel a re-write of the original.

The novel illustrates the life of a young woman. Vasumati was only three when her father died leaving her mother a widow at the age of 25. The mother, Mahalakshmi shoulders the responsibility of arranging marriages for the two girls and educating a son, Ramachandra. She performs the marriage of her first daughter Rajyalakshmi with her husband's sister's son, per husband's wishes. After that, she arranges Vasumati's wedding with Ananda Rao, from a respectable family in Narasaraopet. Ananda Rao befriends Krishnamurthy, a wanton, and Nagamani, a prostitute.

Ananda Rao's older brother and mother encourage him to bring Vasumati and set up a family. They hope that his wife's presence would help him to come to his sense. In stead, Ananda Rao

ill-treats her for a while, sends her back to her natal home, and moves to Rangoon along with Nagamani. In Rangoon, Nagamani turns cozy up to other men and plays Ananda Rao for a fool.

Ananda Rao, desperate for money, finds Sundara Rao, a Telugu publisher and a kindhearted man. He understands Ananda Rao's situation and tries to persuade him to bring his wife to Rangoon but to avail. Eventually, Ananda Rao sees a novel, *Haridasi*, on Sundara Rao's desk and takes it to his room. He finds the story gripping, since it reads very much like his wife's story. He is moved by the story, realizes his mistakes and returns home. He brings Vasumati back to his home and they all live happily ever after.

Unlike the ending in the *Goddess in a Cottage*, the story of Vasumati ends with a joyous note.

Into this story, the author weaves several contemporary issues such as women's education, the dowry system, family values, especially those cherished by brothers towards their sisters. Her comments on women's education are particularly important in the light of her being part of the Veeresalingam's movement for educating women. There is however a marked difference in her approach. While Veeresalingam promoted education for women only to make them better wives and better mothers, Varalakshamma takes it to a higher level. Her protagonist reads not only the books on women's duties to her husband but also other subjects such as English literature, Telugu literature, prosody, history, geography, and math. Her brother Ramachandra helps her which again a practice in vogue (p.17). As I mentioned earlier, the author had received immense support from her brothers.

The author presents Vasumati's brother, Ramachandra, as an ideal young man—a social reformer and patriot who is interested in women's welfare, elimination of dowry and bride-price systems; he is also interested in foreign travel. He shuns ancient practices but holds no grudge against them. He is the kind of person who would study both ancient and modern philosophies, examine them carefully and accept the good things from each one of them. He studies English yet does not take to their bad habits such as cigarettes and liquor.

Author's keen awareness of the changes that had been taking place in the society was obvious in incorporating people's migration to Rangoon in search of wealth. For instance, in Rangoon, Ananda Rao was caught in a dilemma. Nagamani, whom he trusted, was playing him, one day embracing him and another day rejecting him. He was totally at her mercy. Sundara Rao, his employer, sees Ananda Rao's situation and tries to persuade him to bring his wife. He gives him books to read; tells him in so many ways to get his act together. Ananda Rao would not listen. However, one book, *Haridasi*, helps him see the light. I liked this twist. Human nature being what it is the time has to come for anybody to see the light of day. It does not happen in just one stroke or move. In that, the author succeeded in presenting a situation authentically.

The author's command of diction and imagery are superb. Varalakshamma possessed a captivating style. The language is not colloquial by current standards but it was at the time it was written. It is narrated in semi-classical Telugu as was common in her time. The author had penchant for long-winding phrases on occasion. I was amused by her description of Vasumati's beauty in one and a half pages. She gave almost the status of a classical heroine to Vasumati.

For social historians, this makes an excellent reading. The author did an impressive job of presenting it for history.

The book includes a preface by a noted language reformer, Gidugu Ramamurthi Pantulu. He stated that “nowadays, there are plenty of political, historical, fictitious and critical novels but a social novel like this is rare.” We have to understand it within the context.

The book *Viswamitra maharshi* (1933) is a prose kavya. The author depicts Viswamitra as a highly disciplined rishi, a man of determination and strength, both physically and mentally, and a champion of human values. According to Varalakshamma, Viswamitra believed in equality of all human beings. In the narrative, she included several contemporary issues such as the Brahmins and non-Brahmins controversies, caste-related issues, and the social hierarchy.

The author meticulously highlights the demarcations in the hierarchy of the supreme status of man – *rishi*, *rajarshi*, *brahmarishi*. Viswamitra’s refusal to accept himself as *brahmarishi* unless the sage Vasishtha called him so is significant.

Some of the observations made by the author through her protagonist, Viswamitra, are valid even today. Viswamitra states, “One may overcome external forces using money or physical strength but no one can win over the inner foes. One may defeat sexual desires but defeating anger is the hardest” (p.81). His realization that one would not be able to achieve the status of *brahmarishi* until and unless he had defeated his innate anger is a message for all mankind.

Historically, the story of Viswamitra has been associated with the king Harischandra known for his truthfulness and for having his integrity tested by Viswamitra in the harshest way possible. The story, narrated to children, would usually present Viswamitra as ruthless and as an epitome of relentless anger. Varalakshamma on the other hand attempts to depict him as a commendable character, commendable for his devotion, commitment, and fortitude. The author skillfully illustrates his innate strength and persistence in achieving the much coveted *brahmarishi* status.

According to the legend, Viswamitra was born in a royal family with Brahmin qualities because of a mishap. Thus his unique but mixed qualities forced him to deal with conflicting emotions. He is forced to play the role of a prince while consumed by a desire to become a rishi. He goes into severe penance three times and each time fails to consummate his penance. First time, he gives up his penance to save a king who is accursed to be a *chandala* [untouchable] and reinstate his royal life; second time, gives in to his physical desires, and third time to his own anger. Finally, he realizes that his only way to salvation is to overcome anger. Eventually, he accomplishes his goal yet is not content until the highly revered sage Vasishtha accepts it and addresses him as *brahmarishi*.

Additionally, the author argues aptly that Viswamitra’s story is enlightening regarding the arguments between the Brahmins and non-Brahmins, the conflicts between the upper and lower classes, and the distinction between the physical and innate strength. According to Varalakshamma, this story illustrates powerfully the fundamental philosophy that, despite one’s birth in a given caste, a person may attain the highest status in human life by following the righteous path.

Varalakshamma was also against the irrational practices prevalent in our society. In Andhra Pradesh, it is common to burn a child on the forehead when he or she is afflicted with an ailment like tetanus. The author’s disapproval of such practice is illustrated in the *Cottage Goddess*, by making an old man offer an empirical solution.

I could not access all the books written by Varalakshamma. Therefore, I shall take the liberty of quoting from Rajyalakshmi's monograph, in which the author conceptualized Varalakshamma's writings.

"In each story, contemporary society is the dominant theme. The changing conditions, changing perceptions, the good and bad in them, to what extent the old should be adapted and how much of the new we should embrace, to what extent the social reform is needed and in what fields—are some of the topics she chose for her stories.

"During the period Varalakshamma started writing, that is 1920-1940, the story elements such as diction, style, brevity, totality and unity had not yet fully developed. ... Therefore, we should not be using today's criteria to evaluate her stories.

"Varalakshamma's stories are long. In a book, each story takes twenty to twenty-five pages. ... In some stories, one part of the story happens in one place and another part in another place. .... The time—months and years—is also the same way. ... In some stories, characters start out as children and end up as adults.

"The author interferes in the narration to express her opinions and analyze a given situation.

"Each one of her stories is written with a purpose. Most of the time, she writes seriously, with a touch of humor occasionally. Her humor never crosses the line though.

"Style comes naturally to her. That writer's personality has a bearing on his/her style is true in her case. ... Her views on how a story should be written are presented in her story, *katha etlaa undaale* (The Charm of a Cherished Story) and her stories reflect the same qualities." (29-33)

Varalakshamma, a woman of small build, barely 5-foot tall, possessed enormous courage, determination and integrity. She was a driving force behind the women's and social movements in Andhra Pradesh. She founded *stri hitaishini mandali* [Women's welfare consortium] and *yuvati vidyalayam* [College for young women] in Bapatla, her hometown.

Utukuri Lakshmikantamma narrated an incident in her *sahiti rudrama*, highlighting Varalakshamma's deep-rooted convictions. For an organization to run smoothly and successfully, it is important that rules are strictly adhered to. According to the story, one of the members failed to pay the dues on time and Varalakshamma canceled her membership. Lakshmikantamma and a few others attempted to persuade Varalakshamma to take the member back but to no avail. Varalakshamma would rather risk losing a friend than allow indiscretion in running the organization.

Her writings reflect her progressive views and insights unequivocally.

Varalakshamma passed on August 13, 1978. Nevertheless her spirit lives on. Senior writers and the elite of Andhra Pradesh cherish her memory fondly. I hope the current generation will learn about her. Those who can learn Telugu may find the monograph written by Polapragada Rajyalakshmi, *Kanuparthi Varalakshamma* (Sahitya Akademi publication) gratifying.

I had the honor of standing on the same stage with Varalakshamma garu and Utukuri Lakshmikantamma garu in 1968 at the Andhra Women Writers Conference. That was a moment I would cherish forever.



**NIDUDAVOLU VENKATARAO:**  
**A Moving Encyclopedia, Poet And Eminent Literary Historian.**  
**(3 January 1903 - 15 October 1982)**

Vidyaratna, Kalaprapoorna Nidudavolu Venkatarao was a poet, scholar, and a literary historian with unusual flair. His contemporaries called him *jangama vijnana sarvaswamu*, a moving encyclopedia because of his extensive knowledge of classics in several languages and exceptional retention ability, because of which he was able to quote extempore from any text anytime.

Venkatarao was born on 3 January 1903 in Vizianagaram. He was the fourth child and the first son, and as such, he was raised fondly by his parents, Sundaram Pantulu and Jogamma.

The Nidudavolu lineage was known for rich scholarly tradition. His father, Sundaram Pantulu was a staunch follower of Saivite traditions, avid reader, and collector of classics in Telugu and Sanskrit. Later the collection was donated to Madras University, which was the beginning of the famous Madras Oriental Library. His mother Jogamma was eloquent storyteller. Anytime someone asked about something, she would go into a torrential narration.

Early in life, Venkatarao had the ideal atmosphere to become well versed in Telugu and Sanskrit classics. He never read a book so he could say, “I have read it,” and never forgot what he had read. Additionally, he had the extraordinary capability to remember whatever he had read, which was useful in his scholastic pursuits. “There is no book he had not read, and no book he had not read totally immersed in it. He is the global lamp that could show what is available in what corner (in literature),” commented Tirumala Ramachandra (as quoted by Nistala. *Pariseelana*. 10). His zeal to gather information and record it for posterity set new standards in Telugu literature.

Even in his childhood days, Venkatarao used to compose poetry and sing in an enchanting voice at meetings and literary gatherings. In his later years, he continued to go to meetings, recite the invocation and read his poems. And he never finished the invocation with just one verse but two—one in Sanskrit and one in Telugu. His language skills in English and other Indian languages were remarkable. His English was equally appreciated by the elite in his time.

Venkatarao attended high school and Intermediate (two-year, pre-degree course) in Visakhapatnam. Later he attended Maharaja College in Vizianagaram and obtained his Bachelor’s degree in 1925. Due to financial reasons, he could not pursue studies and joined the Imperial Bank (now State Bank of India) as clerk in 1926, which he held until 1939.

He was married while he was in Kakinada and the couple had five sons and two daughters. His first son, Sundareswara Rao followed his father in scholastic pursuits became a well-respected scholar. Venkatarao’s wife passed away in 1949.

Venkatarao left his job at the Imperial bank in 1940 and went to Madras to obtain his master’s degree. In 1942, he returned to Kakinada where he worked as Telugu lecturer for one year and

then and went back to Madras University where he started as junior lecturer at Madras University and continued until retired as Head of the Telugu department in 1964. “I had to retire, although I could work five more years,” said Venkatarao, which seems to imply he was forced to retire.

During this period however, Venkatarao surprised his audience with his scholarship, critical insights, and his unequaled retention power. He was often referred to as *ekasanthaagraahi*, meaning he could remember anything he had heard just once. At one time, it seems, a friend asked him about a word in *vijayavilasam* by Chemakura Venkata kavi, and Venkatarao, standing under a tree, recited the entire text. C.S. Rao, writer, actor and movie director said his was computer brain, not without merit. ( letter dated 5 January 1985, as quoted by Dr. Nistala.).

Dr. Nistala Venkata Rao studied the works of Nidudavolu Venkatarao for his M.Phil. and later Ph.D. He discussed the monumental work of Nidudavolu Venkatarao and the massive contribution to Telugu literature in great detail in his book, *Nidudavolu Venkatarao – pariseelana* [Nidudavolu Venkatarao – A Study].

**A brief note** is in order here. Since the names of the two authors—the subject of this article and the researcher are the same and even the initial letter in their surnames is the same, I decided to refer to the researcher, Dr. Nistala Venkata Rao as Nistala, and Nidudavolu Venkatarao as Venkatarao. And, Nistala’s book as *pariseelana*.

Further, my surname is also Nidadavolu. Venkatarao garu and my father were first cousins (children of two brothers). There is however a small difference, a variation in spelling the surnames. Venkatarao garu always spelled his surname as **Nidudavolu** (with ‘u’ in the second syllable) whereas in my family it has always been **Nidadavolu**. In this article, I kept the spelling Venkatarao had used for his name.

During his job at the Imperial bank, he was invited to work in a dictionary project, which brought his retention skills to light. As the story goes, the Pithapuram Raja Suryarao Bahaddur was reading the *kumarasabhavam* kavya and needed a scholar knowledgeable in Saivite literature. Somebody suggested Venkatarao’s name and the Pithapuram Raja sent for him. Eventually, that led Venkatarao to become compiler of a dictionary to be named after the Raja as *suryarayandhra nighantuvu*. Their friendship turned out to be a blessing for Venkatarao.

Speaking of his job at the bank, Venkatarao quipped, “I have moved from numbers to letters (literature) where as the people at the universities have shifted from letters to numbers [money]. (*pariseelana*. Venkatarao in his response to the felicitation by Andhra Vijnana Samiti, Tyagaraja College, Chennai. 255.).

In 1939, Venkatarao went to Madras, obtained his master’s degree, and returned to Kakinada to work as a lecturer in Kakinada College for a year, 1941-42. In the following year, he applied for junior lecturer’s position at Madras University, and got the job on a recommendation from the Pithapuram Raja. In 1947, Venkatarao became senior lecturer and in 1959 and later reader. Later he became the head of the Telugu department and retired in 1964. Venkatarao stated that he could work for five more years but they made him retire. (*pariseelana*. 257.).

While working as bank clerk, he undertook to write an elaborate preface and annotations for the hitherto unknown book, *tripurantakodaharanam*, and published it in 1935. The book won the Telugu Bhasha Samiti award. In his preface, Venkatarao had mentioned that he was instrumental in reviving the two-hundred year-old *udaaharana* genre and introducing it to the Telugu people.

After he moved to Madras, he wrote its complete, *udaaharana vanjmayacharitra* [History of *udaaharana* literature]. Several reputable scholars like Viswanatha Satyanarayana wrote verses in *udaaharana* style after Venkatarao brought the genre to light.

From the very little I have understood, the *udaaharana* poetry is a genre of poetry, written in praise of god, using all the seven grammatical cases. Since all verbs in Dravidian languages include case markings, it is only appropriate that all the case markings be included in praising the lord, Viswanatha Satyanarayana observed. By reviving the two-hundred year-old literary form, and discussing the genre elaborately in his book, *udaaharana vanjmayam*, [Udaharana literature], Venkatarao rendered a notable service to Telugu literature in 1954.

While Venkatarao was junior lecturer in Madras university, during 1944-1949, he undertook to write the *Telugu kavula charitra* [Lives of Telugu poets], dating from the earliest times to 1500 A.D. In his preface (the author provided the preface in English also in addition to the Telugu version), Mr. Venkatarao stated that the social conditions and the lives of the ordinary peoples had been recorded distinctively in the Saivite literature but not in the Hindu texts as had been hitherto claimed. Possibly, for the same reason, Mr. Venkatarao pursued his scholarly work in Saivite literature and produced two more works, which won significant place in the history of Telugu literature. His major contribution in this volume is recognizing authors of inscriptions as poets. Nistala commented that up until then, the authors of inscriptions were not taken into account in the annals of literary history. Venkatarao was the first literary historian to give them their due place in the history of Telugu literature (*pariseelana*. 69) and thus laid path to a new trend.

Venkatarao contributed to Telugu literature immensely by reviving and reinterpreting and providing extensive commentaries on books in Saivaite literature. His major works in this area included editing *panditaraadhya charitra* by Mallikarjuna Panditaradhya, editing and providing elaborate annotations and commentary to *Basava puranam*, and *sivatattava saaram* by Manchana. The amount of information he had given in each of these classics set new record in the field of Telugu literature.

In his preface to his own work, *Southern School of Telugu Literature*, Venkatarao stated that investigation of this subject was itself new. Venkatarao identified for the first that Telugu literature flourished in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries under the non-Telugu speaking Nayaka rulers in the South states of Tanjore, Madhurai, Pudukkottai, and Salem and also under Maratta rulers. It was even more interesting since even the people in these states did not speak Telugu. The rulers were obviously fascinated by the sweetness of the language and encouraged poets to write in Telugu. Venkatarao wrote his preface in English to this volume probably to facilitate reading at least the preface by the non-Telugu speaking readers. Not only literature but language also flourished during this period, he added. Some critics had commented on the non-standard usage of the language and said those poets were not knowledgeable in grammar (*laakshanikulu*). Venkatarao on the other hand, called it natural development of the language, and commended those poets for their originality and usage of the native idiom. He also discusses the relationship between other south Indian languages such as Kannada, Malayalam, and Tamil and Telugu, and goes to prove that congenial atmosphere between the people in the South during this period.

Another significant work was his history of Telugu poets, *Southern School of Telugu Literature*. Previously, Manavalli Ramakrishna kavi and Chaganti Seshayya had produced two books on the same subject. However, unlike other historians, Venkatarao included several writers other

historians had not taken note of. Among them, the poets who had composed inscriptions were acknowledged as poets for the first time. Additionally, Venkatarao went to great length to find all the data for each author—his times, works, different versions of each work, in different languages if any, the origins of the text, and the textual variations, etc.

His work on prose literature, *Andhra vacana vanjmayam* originated from his lectures on prose literature. Sivalenka Sambhuprasad, editor of *Bharati* monthly, and other friends encouraged Venkatarao to develop his lectures as a book. Sambhuprasad promised to publish it under Andhra granthamala, (an organ of Bharati) banner.

In this book, Venkatarao, as was his wont, had covered all the extant literature in the form of prose starting from early times to the most recent novels, short stories in the weekly and monthly magazines, radio speeches, etc.

Regarding the short stories in Telugu, Venkatarao wrote: “In Sanskrit literature, stories have a special place. Everybody is familiar with the opening line in Maha Bharata, ‘that story-teller said to such sages as Saunaka.’ Pancatantra stories belong to Bharatadesam [India]. ... All these stories were originally in Sanskrit. There is one special feature here. In Sanskrit, these texts are in the poetic form. There is no equivalent in Sanskrit for the Telugu word *vacanam* [prose]. They all are in the form of *slokas*. ... thus, the stories in the early days were translations from Sanskrit in the form of poetry (e.g. Harsha charitra, pancatantram, kadambari) and viewed as *kavya* literature. In Telugu literature, until the advent of modern period, the short story remained poetic in nature,” he said. (*Andhra vacanavanjmayamu* 127-8).

To give an example of the extent of data he would include, I was surprised to see an explanation as to how the word *komma* [branch] came to mean “woman”. He said the word referred to a game women used to play in which one woman would attempt to touch other women with a branch and others would try to dodge it. Eventually, the word came to be used as equivalent to woman.

Commenting on modern prose literature, Venkatarao said that women ranked first among writers of fiction in modern times. He named Pulugurta Lakshmi Narasamamba as the first woman writer of fiction. Her novel, *yogiswari*, was published in 1927 by Andhra Pracharini Granthamala. In this period, Kovvali Lakshmi Narasimha Rao (known as Kovvali) made history by producing a record one thousand novels. “I had the honor of writing preface to his one thousandth novel,” said Venkatarao.

In his preface to his own book, *Pothana*, Venkatarao discussed not only Pothana’s life and times, but also the beauty of the Telugu language, the reasons it had become so popular even among the illiterate, and went on to refute the popular myth that the Saivaites hated Lord Vishnu. He established with apt illustrations that the Saivaites did not reject the existence of Vishnu but portrayed him in their literatures as a devotee of Siva (*Pothana. Avatarika, 1-27*)

In explaining the progression in Pothana’s life, he said,

For many, Pothana was a riddle as he [Pothana] followed the Viramaheswara tradition, supported devotion to Lord Vishnu [*vishnubhakti*] and, in the end, achieved non-dualism [*advaitasiddhi*] for himself.

Venkatarao argued that this confusion was a reflection of the social conditions of his time and partly due to its misrepresentation in literature.

While commenting that Pothana's Bhagavatam was the most popular classic yet among the scholars as well as the illiterate, he said that there was not a single Telugu person who would not know at least a few poems from Bhagavatam. In support of his observation, he recounted the following story:

In a small village, one day the Bhagavatar [narrator] failed to show up on the stage. Then one villager from the audience stood and recited a poem from the Bhagavatam, mispronouncing the words, which changed the meaning.

The original text read, "The Manu was the fourth among the kings [*manavaadhiswara*]".

The text as recited by the villager read, "The man had a tongue that weighed one *manugu*."

After that, another villager stood and recited the next line, "Even Kundina king in Vidarbha would have a tongue weighing one *manugu*", apparently, continuing the story from the preceding line.

The correct line would be "in Vidarbha, there was a combatant named Kundina."

This narrative captured my attention particularly because of the way it was narrated by Venkatarao. Despite his reputation for being highly critical of errors, in this narration, Venkatarao appeared to be tolerant of mispronunciations and misuse of words [*Pothana .Preface. 3*].

Venkatarao's prefaces earned him the reputation that "he lives in the town of prefaces" [*mee kaapuram peethikaapuram*], commented a contemporary scholar and friend, Ganti Suryanarayana Sastry (Nistala. *Pariseelana*. 242.). His scrupulous attention to detail, his ardor to cover the topic from all angles was evident in his prefaces to any book he had written.

Just to give one example, his book, *sivatatthavasaaramu* was 104 pages and Venkatarao's preface to the book was 91 pages. In his preface, he had discussed the author's time, social conditions, the main features of Saivite literature, grammar, and prosody in detail.

In his preface to *Basava puranam* by Palkuriki Somanatha and his preface to and meticulous editing of *panditaraadhya charitra*, Venkatarao showed as much his love of Saivite literature as his scholarship in editing and writing information-packed commentaries.

Venkatarao undertook the story of Southern School in Telugu Literature as a research project. In his preface, he stated that, "The subject itself is a new field of investigation. The literature, which developed in the southern parts where Tamil is the spoken language. .. It is a peculiar phenomenon that even the Maratha rulers of Tanjore have patronised [sic.] Telugu, which was neither their own language nor that of the people who were under his sway." (The original in English. Preface, p.1.)

One of his innovations was to introduce the inscriptions as literature in this volume on Southern School. Secondly, he quotes the features peculiar to South Andhra Literature as 1. Royal poets and non-Brahmin poets flourished greatly; 2. Female poets obtained special place in literature; 3. *dwipada* and *yakshagaana* performances thrived; 4. Prose literature developed systematically; 5. Lyrics comprised of music and literary qualities received an impetus; 6. Flaunting of unfettered, promiscuous expression in *prabhandas*; 7. *santvana kavya rachana* [Appeasing the incensed

heroine], 8. *nayakaabhyudaya rachana* [Heroic in praise of kings]; 9. *udaaharana* and historical writings; and, 10. Literatures of scientific disciplines.

Venkatarao added that not only literature but language also flourished during this period. “Some believe that some of these writings included grammatically incorrect words and those writers were not *laakshinikulu* [grammarians]. In reality, the language in these works has presented itself as dynamic and capable of normal metamorphosis the same way as in the period of Saivite poets. Additionally, the language reflected the subtleties, nuance, and the usage prevalent in those times.”

Venkatarao’s major contributions in Saivaite literature were his exhaustive preface to *Basava puranam* by Palkuriki Somanatha, and his preface and extensive commentaries to *Panditaradhya charitra*. In both the volumes, he discussed at length the Saivaite philosophy, their authorship, textual variations, usage of words, and so on.

### **Criticisms and comments on works by other contemporary writers**

Venkatarao was passionate about his work as a scholar. In that, he would not hesitate to comment on others’ work, sometimes, harshly, much to the chagrin of those writers. At times, the others did not take the comments too well and retorted in the same tone.

One of the stories caught my attention was an episode involving Venkatarao’s comments on *samagra Andhra sahityam* by Arudra. Personally, I have great regard for both Venkatarao and Arudra.

Nistala mentioned that Venkatarao criticized *samagra Andhra sahityam* [Comprehensive History of Telugu Literature] by Arudra, but did not give the exact comment. He however added that, “*samagra Andhra sahityam* has been written in simple language for general readers with average knowledge. The author [Arudra] was originally a poet, who later became involved his research. Therefore, it is natural for errors to seep in. Venkatarao was a great scholar from the start. ... It would have been better if he (Venkatarao) had given constructive criticism and encouraged the author [Arudra].”

Nistala continued to add that Arudra happened to visit Venkatarao at his home, and Venkatarao said, addressing him [Arudra] as *nayanaa* affectionately, “I am finicky [*maadi chadastam*]. We say things but young people like you must continue to render service to literature.” (*pariseelana*. 48).

Nevertheless, there was no mention of Venkatarao and his enormous service to Telugu literature in *Samagra Andhra Sahityam* by Arudra, which is hard to explain.

Venkatarao was harsh in his criticism of others’ works. Dr. Nistala also gave a few other examples of Venkatarao’s abrasive comments and thereby his alienation from his contemporary writers, especially younger generation writers. For instance, Venkatarao, while working on his book, *dakshinandhra vanjmayam*, criticized *radhikasvantanam* by S. V. Joga Rao and even forwarded his comments to the Vice Chancellor. Joga Rao, in retaliation, called Venkatarao’s *Telugu kavula charitra* [History of Telugu Poets] as *akhanda deepaaraadhana kavulu charitra* [History of poets like the eternal lamps], referring to a ritual of keeping a lamp lit incessantly. Probably, Joga Rao implied the work was ritualistic rather than scholarly. Additionally, he questioned Venkatarao’s reputation as a scholar and called his work, *daskhinadhra sahiyam*, nothing but a “catalogue scholarship”.

Venkatarao was equally abrasive of scholarly articles as well in his criticism. His comments on Korlapati Srirama Murthy provoked Srirama Murthy into remarking that Venkatarao “was not qualified to be Head of the Telugu department.”

Probably Viswanatha Satyanarayana put it aptly when he said at a meeting that, “God gave him [Venkatarao] infinite scholarship but not pleasurable speech.” Sundareswara Rao, Venkatarao’s son, was quoted as saying that his father, “stayed so converged on literature as his ultimate goal that he alienated himself from society with his argumentative language in his criticisms.” (*pariseelana*. 47).

As Nistala pointed out, Venkatarao did not show the same kind of sophistication in his comments as writing the original prefaces. His comments were not to be dismissed as biased though. Several of his comments had been very useful in revising the texts at the time of reprint, Nistala said.

Venkatarao had written thousands of articles, numerous valuable forewords, and delivered hundreds of speeches both on the air and in person, according to Dr. Nistala.

Venkatarao’s another contribution was in the field of usage of words known as *prayogam* in literature, which the scholars in his day were not always receptive to. Venkatarao insisted that the usage of words by poets should take precedence over grammar rules since it reflected the language of the general population and thus deserved to be credited. This was consistent with the *vyaavaharika bhashodyamam* (Movement to promote colloquial style in writing) and portrayed Venkatarao as a traditionalist nonetheless modernist. His contribution to Telugu literature went beyond the pale of traditional scholarship and reached out to humanity. Another example of his universal outlook was his enthusiasm to work on Christian literature much the same way as on Saivite works and other Hindu texts.

Due to his erudition and nonconforming views, Venkatarao collected an impressive line of titles, some conferred ceremoniously and others came through casual conversations. (Nistala. 75-77)

The *Vidyaratna award* was conferred on him by Andhra Saraswata Parishat, Narasaraopet (date was not given).

Andhra University conferred the prestigious *Kalaprapoorna* title on him in 1970. The title was created by Dr. C.R. Reddy, Vice Chancellor, in 1927, to honor the scholars who had no formal doctoral degrees yet excelled in scholarship acquired through traditional learning.

In 1976, he became an honorary member on the Sahitya Akademi Advisory Board.

The title *jangama vijnana sarvasvam* [Walking Encyclopedia] was a descriptive phrase used with reference to his scholarship. It seems the term was used in a speech at a small village called Pedapudi, in Tenali taluq, and came to be used as a title in course of time. Notably, the word *jangama* refers to a section among Saivaites and Venkatarao had been an authority on Saivaite traditions and literature.

Another such title fortuitously acquired by Venkatarao was *prayoga mushika marjaala*, drawing on the imagery of a cat pouncing on the mice snuck in a corner. It was not clear who used the phrase or when but it was an apt one for him because of his painstaking effort to find usage of words in the extant texts.

Viswanatha Satyanarayana had great respect for Venkatarao. After he had received the prestigious Jnanapeeth award, he wrote a book, *Andhra dhaatukriya manideepika* [Dictionary

grammatical cases]. In this connection, Viswanatha Satyanarayana told Venkatarao that he had searched everywhere but could not find the usage for the word *manasainadi* [rough translation would be ‘setting one’s heart on something’]. Venkatarao said he could show one hundred instances of it for him (Viswanatha). Satyanarayana asked him to show them. Venkatarao quoted a line, *nee chakkadanambu chuuda manasainadi nanda nandanaa* [my heart is set on watching your beauty], from a book of one hundred verses [*satakam*], entitled *nanda nandana satakamu*. Satyanarayana was impressed with Venkatarao’s scholarship and in later years used to say that Venkatarao was the only qualified person to compile a dictionary. On another occasion, Satyanarayana said Venkatarao was *parisodhana parameswarulu* [The Almighty Siva in Research], which came to be used as one of his titles. (*pariseelana*.75).

Dr. Nistala observed that Venkatarao’s service to Telugu literature is comparable to the service rendered by Sir. C.P. Brown. Both were interested in reviving the literature ignored by other scholars in their day, both devoted themselves to bracing the Saivite literature, both believed in altering the prevalent notion that Saivite literature was not worthy of scholars’ attention. Both understood that the social conditions and the lives of the ordinary people were reflected best in the Saivite literature. According to the two scholars, the Saivaites were staunch believers in bringing literature to the ordinary people. Ironically, in some instances, both Venkatarao and Brown adhered to the specifics equally.

Venkatarao was a staunch devotee of Siva and Anjaneya. He started his day with a visit to the Anjaneya temple and performed Siva puja every Monday. Possibly, his rigorous religious practices gave him the discipline necessary to excel in his scholarly pursuits. Whatever he undertook, he completed with unusual zest and flair and with extraordinary success.

Despite his complex scholarship, life had been a struggle for him financially. After his retirement in 1964, he moved to Hyderabad, and was appointed professor at Osmania university, under a UGC project created for retired professors. Venkatarao held the position from 1964-1968.

In 1974, the government of Andhra Pradesh and the Sahitya Akademi granted him one hundred rupees per month each. The government of Andhra Pradesh raised their grant to five hundred rupees in 1982.

Referring to his financial conditions, Tirumala Ramachandra, a notable critic and scholar, said to Venkatarao once, “had you continued in your job at the Imperial Bank, you would have earned three thousand a month.” Venkatarao replied, “I know that one of my colleagues at the bank is making two thousand five hundred a month now. However, if I had continued in the bank and pursued my scholarly activities, I would not have had the same content as I am enjoying now by rendering service to literature.”

On October 15, 1982, he passed away at midnight on the Sivaratri day, which is a highly coveted form of death in the Saivaites tradition.

In summary, the enormous contributions of Nidudavolu Venkatarao to Telugu literature in terms of rewriting the literary history, acknowledging the hitherto little known or unknown poets, compiling dictionaries, reviving the Saivaites classics and reinterpreting them put him in the rank and file of eminent scholars. His work in *udaaharana literature* and acknowledging the composers of inscriptions [*sasana kavulu*] as notable poets is considered remarkable.



Once again, I would like to acknowledge my gratitude to Dr. Nistala Venkatarao, whose work has been of immenset help in writing this article. For complete list of Nidudavolu Venkatarao's works, please refer to Dr. Nistala Venkata Rao's book, *nidudavolu venkatarao gari rachanalu: pariseelana*, pages, 190-225.

### **Partial List of the works by Nidudavolu Venkatarao.**

*Cinnayasuri jeevitamu: Paravastu Chinnayasuri krutha Hindu dhramasastra sangrahamu sahitamugaa*, 1962

*Dakshinadeseyandhra vanjmayamu*, The Southern School of Telugu Literature. (With preface in English) 1954

*Kopparapu sodarakavula charitra*. 1973.

*Nannechodunu kavitaavaibhavamu: Nannechoduni padyaalaku ruchira vyakhyaanam..* 1976.

*Potana*. 1962.

*Telugu kavula charitra*. 1956.

*Udaaharana vanjmaya charitra*. 1968

*Vijayanagara samsthaanam: Andhra vanjmaya poshana*. 1965.

*Andhra vachana vanjmayamu*. 1977.

*Andhra vachana vanjmayamu: pracheena kalamu nundi 1900 A.D. varaku*. 1954

*Bhamaakalapamu*, edited by P. Jayamma. 1999

### **Prefaces and commentaries.**

*Sri Nachana Somanathuni hamsaadibakopakhyanam (uttara harivamsamu, chaturtha aswaasamu)*. Commentary by Nidudavolu Venkatarao. 1972.

### **Editions and revisions by Nidudavolu Venkatarao.**

*Sivatatthva saaramu* by Mallikarjuna Panditaaraadhyulu. Edited with extensive annotations by Nidudavolu Venkatarao, 1968.

*Prabodha chandrodayamu* by Nandi Mallaya. Edited by Nidudavolu Venkatarao, 1976.

*Sabdaratnakaram* by Bahujanapalli Sitaramacharyulu (1827-1891). Revised by Nidudavolu Venkatarao. 1969.

### **Collaborations.**

*Sakalanitisaaramu*, by Madiki Singana. Edited by Nidudavolu Venkatarao and Ponangi Srirama Apparao. 1970.

*Manavalli rachanalu*. Edited by Nidudavolu Venkatarao and Ponangi Srirama Apparao. 1972.

*Telugu Kannadamula samskrutika sambandhaalu*, by Nidudavolu Venkatarao, et. Al. 1974.

*Telugu, Kannada, Tamila, Malayala bhashalalo saati samethalu*, compiled by Nidudavolu Venkatarao, et. al., 1961.

**On Nidudavolu Venkatarao and his works.**

Nistala Venkata Rao. *Nidudavolu Venkatarao: Pariseelana*. 1984. Available on the internet. This book has provided complete list of all the works and speeches in 35 pages and organized according to topics.

## Dr. NAYANI KRISHNAKUMARI

### A Distinguished Scholar In Folklore And Literature

In the post-colonial Andhra Pradesh, Dr. Nayani Krishnakumari stands out as an exceptional scholar, poet, researcher, speaker, and academic. There are very few women who have attained the stature of scholarship as Krishnakumari in modern day Andhra Pradesh.

Nayani Krishnakumari was born in Guntur in 1930. She is the eldest daughter of Nayani Subba Rao, a reputed poet and historian, and mother Hanumayamma. She has four siblings (one brother and three sisters. The brother passed away in 1968).

Krishnakumari did most of her schooling in Narasaraopet except the one year in Srikakulam. In Guntur, she finished Intermediate in flying colors. Originally she thought of going into medicine but did not pursue though. Instead, she went to Andhra University, Visakhapatnam in pursuit of Telugu literature studies.

The three years, 1948-51, in Visakhapatnam, played a decisive role in her life and literary pursuits. There, she met several writers, poets and scholars, and participated actively in many literary and cultural events. She was the first woman in Andhra University to act and direct a play in 1948, wrote his close friend Antati Narasimham, whom Krishnakumari addresses fondly as *annayya* [older brother]. During that time, Narasimham and a few other students were running a hand-written monthly magazine called *azad hind*. Narasimham saw one of Krishnakumari's early poems, *brundagaanam* [group song], was impressed by the poem and her handwriting, and invited Krishnakumari to be the scribe for the magazine. Her poem, *visakha naa neccheli* [Visakha, my Best Friend], written in 1977, speaks of the special place she holds in her heart for the city.

Krishnakumari married Kanakavalli Madhusudana Rao, a distant relative and polite young man and choice bridegroom of both the families. He is a lawyer by profession. They have three children—one daughter and two sons. Regarding her marriage, her friend Narasimham has an interesting story to tell. Being a vocal advocate of inter-caste marriages, he told Krishnakumari to have an inter-caste marriage. Krishnakumari replied that she would not mind but she preferred to marry per wishes of her and the young man's family.

Narasimham has mentioned in the same article that Krishnakumari believes that the caste system is vocation-based, despite her education. Regarding her personality, Narasimham writes that she is good-natured, respects all—young and old, the famous and the ordinary alike. She has taken after her father as much in character as in physical traits.

Krishnakumari's father, Nayani Subba Rao, was an esteemed poet and historian, which might have contributed to her interest in the cultural and literary history of Telugu people. While she was studying B.A. (Honors.), she took a course on the History of Andhra Pradesh and she noted down the lessons after each class. These notes were published as a series of articles in a popular magazine, *Andhra Prabha*, and later as a book entitled *Andhrula katha* [The Andhra People's story]. The book was prescribed as a textbook in schools—an attestation of her writing skills. She was just 18 years-old at the time.

Krishnakumari has always been surrounded by caring family members and literary stalwarts of her time. Impressed by her poetry written at a very early age, Jnanapeeth awardee, Kavisamrat Viswanatha Satyanarayana nurtured her as he would his own daughter. She used to call him as *pedananna* [father's older brother].

Krishnakumari originally began working on Tikkana's use of language for her Ph.D. dissertation but never finished it. Later, with a little nudge from her husband Madhusudana Rao and friend Antati Narasimham, she worked on the ballads in folklore and received her Ph.D. in 1970. She also has master's degree in Sanskrit.

In 1951, Krishnakumari started her teaching career as Lecturer in Ethiraja College in Madras. The following year, in 1952, she moved to Osmania University Women's College in Hyderabad, where she started as Lecturer, became Reader in 1967, and later Professor in 1983. She served as Principal of Padmavathi Mahila University, Tirupati, for one year, 1983-84, and returned to Osmania University as Head of the Department of Telugu. She retired in 1990 after serving as Chair of the Board of Studies in Osmania University for three years. Krishnakumari served as Vice Chancellor of Sri Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad, from 1996 to 1999. Currently, she is professor emeritus at Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University.

Marking her sixtieth birthday and retirement, several scholars and the elite in Andhra Pradesh honored Krishnakumari as an esteemed scholar in modern Telugu literature. The *festschriften* volume, *vidushi*, features several articles from eminent scholars. (It has been a useful source for this article).

Krishnakumari has participated in numerous conferences, seminars, organized writers' conferences and traveled extensively in India and abroad. She has served on reputable literary and progressive organizations in various capacities. By 1990, the list of her accomplishments extending over a period of 38 years is six-page long according to the *festschriften* volume.

Krishnakumari is a recipient of several prestigious awards such as Gruhalakshmi Swarnakankanam, Best Woman Writer of Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, Best Writer from Telugu University, and Telugu University Award in the best Literature produced by women.

Krishnakumari is a pioneer in the fields of Folklore and women's literature. She entered the field at a time when even male scholars were scarce in the study of folklore. Only a few names such as Biruduraju Ramaraju, Nedunuri Gangadharam and Hari Adishesu were known at the time.

While she was professor, Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Krishnakumari prepared the syllabus for M.A. in folklore. It was later published as *telugu janapada vijnanam: samaajam, samskruti, sahityam*. The book includes several chapters by several scholars in folklore with topics for discussion and further research. It could serve as a model or a valuable tool for students looking for guidance in the field.

Under her guidance, a total of twenty students worked for their M.Phil. and Doctoral degrees. One of her students, Pulikonda Subbachari, mentioned that, "students consider it a blessing to have her as their guide. ... With her dissertation, the scientific study of Telugu folklore took a new turn. The elite agree that she broke the ground and laid the path by shifting the research methodology from the descriptive mode to the analytical mode." It would appear that the research in folklore has been conducted in three phases: In the first phase, the characteristics of a specific aspect of the folklore are identified and defined; In the second phase, scholars accepted

it as literature only half-heartedly or condescendingly; and, in the third phase, scholars started to recognize it as a form of literature that needs to be studied with a different set of rules. Krishnakumari laid the path for this third phase. In her own research, she adopted the same method she had established as the best for our folklore, which belongs to anthropological school.

In fieldwork, she welcomes the methodology of the western scholars but does not encourage accepting it in its entirety or without questioning. She differs especially in regard to the contextual data collection. In collecting and presenting data, Krishnakumari says that the scholars must make a distinction between the material needed for native scholars and the western scholars. Presumably, there are details that need to be furnished to those who are not familiar with our culture.

Krishnakumari puts greater emphasis on field work as opposed to reading published works, “armchair research” as she puts it. In gathering data, advises students to focus on meta-folklore—the concepts underlying the words the folks speak. It is important for the researcher to ask questions tactfully and draw the causal beliefs and convictions of the subjects.

Her students speak fondly of her. She is not just a guide who walks them through to their degrees but is also a good friend and mentor.

One of her students, Ravi Premalatha, commented that, “Usually researchers pick one topic from several established categories such as collecting data, classification, analysis, comparative studies, and construction for their study but Krishnakumari has worked in all these areas and proved her multifarious talent.” (*vidushi*. p.25.).

Premalatha continued to say that Krishnakumari applied the straight line equation from mathematics to the storytelling methods in folklore and proved her unparallel talent. This is a new experiment in the studies of folklore in Telugu literature and a mark of Krishnakumari’s knowledge of mathematics and her erudition in research methodologies.

Krishnakumari’s articles on Telugu people’s customs, lifestyles, and culture also attest to her comprehension and knowledge in the areas in question.

Krishnakumari publications include two anthologies of her poetry *Agniputri* [Daughter of Fire, 1978] and *Em cheppanu nestam!* [What Can I Say, My Friend!, 1988]; history books: *Andhrula katha* [The Story of Andhra People], and *telugu bhasha charitra* [History of Telugu language], ; two collections of short stories: *Ayaatha* (A Collection of short stories), *Gautami* (novel), *manamuu*, *mana puurvulu* [We and Our Ancestors], *Aparajita* (A collaborative novel with three other writers), *pariseelana* [An Anthology of reviews], *parisodhana* [A Collection of research papers], *kashmira deepakalika* (A travelogue, recounting her experiences of a tour in Kashmir with a group of students), and *Telugu Janapada geya gaathalu* (Ph.D. dissertation on ballads in Telugu folklore) and several others. To date, she has published about 20 books.

Krishnakumari’s publications do not speak sufficiently of her erudition. And that does not bother her. Mr. Narasimham mentioned a brief conversation he had with her regarding the paucity of her publications and suggested that she should spend less time on speeches in schools and colleges and more on writing and publishing. Krishnakumari replied, “These students spend so much time and energy on organizing these events. It is not fair for us to take a ‘high and mighty’ attitude and snub them.”

Her views on poetry are well recorded in her foreword to her book, *agniputri*. Therein, Krishnakumari stated not only her reasons for writing poetry but also for writing her own

preface. Krishnakumari believes that works by a writer possess insights only the writer can explain. As an example, she remembers her own study of Tikkana's usage of language and the moments she wished the poet was here to explain. It is not uncommon for a critic to misconstrue or misinterpret the original author's message, she adds.

Krishnakumari believes that it is important that the reader be aware of the author's echelon of the psyche, confidence, empathy, and discipline. Readers' awareness of the measures the author uses for evaluating the good and the bad, the light and the shadows and the author's perceptions through his experiences— they all contribute towards the reader's appreciation of the poetry on hand. She speaks from the heart and in no uncertain terms. For her, poetry is a means to express oneself, it must be sincere. In her preface, she took a jab at the writers who just in a corner in their rooms and write provocatively. She is a person of action.

Krishnakumari also says she is not writing for fame or fortune. She writes only when she is inspired. Speaking of inspiration, mention must be made of two poems, intensely personal. First one was written when her mother had fallen seriously ill and Dr. Sridevi, a good friend of Krishnakumari, saved her mother's life. Second was the title of her second book, *em cheppanu nestam*, which was written at the time when the same friend, Sridevi passed away. The two poems are even more touching for the fact that one incident brought them together and the second tore them apart. Krishnakumari was shaken both times. The two poems eloquently describe the heartrending pain she had sustained.

Krishnakumari is a protester without labels. She welcomes change but not like a militant rebel. She believes in the kind of change which penetrates deep into the lives of people unobtrusively. She likens the change to a seasoned housewife who defies the world without a bang and takes care of her family with inimitable dexterity.

Krishnakumari wrote only about a dozen or so. Some of them were published as a collection entitled *ayatha*.<sup>[1]</sup> The stories reflect her personality and attitude towards family and society. In stories like *ayatha*, *kavigari bharya*, *pushpalata tecchina kakarakaayalu*, the author illustrates the endearing relationship between a husband and his wife. The stories also identify the finer details in the interaction between cousins<sup>[2]</sup> (children of a brother and sister.). In *kavigari bharya*, the wife addresses husband as *nuvvu* [informal singular] when she feels close to him and *meeru* [formal, respectful] when she is displeased.

In literature, her travelogue, *kashmira deepakalika*, is unique for its style. It is an account of her experiences, her response to the beauty of nature in the Kashmir valley, during a tour she had undertaken with a group of her students. Chekuri Rama Rao, a reputable critic and scholar, stated that the book, unlike usual travelogues, is a literary masterpiece brimming with poetry.<sup>[3]</sup> (See the article on Krishna Kumari's poetry by Vaidehi Sasidhar).

Krishnakumari traces the history of oral literature in her book, *janapada vanjmayam*. Some of the premises in the book are:

1. The oral tradition existed from times immemorial. Rhythm is inherent along with sound in all the entities in nature. In course of time, man might have developed the dance technique in an attempt to give form to the sound and rhythm. It is hard to establish when the story element was woven into the folk art.

2. There are no definitive answers for questions such as "What did he accomplish by incorporating storyline into his singing and dancing. Psychologists profess that man's unfulfilled

desires manifest themselves as fulfilled dreams in art. For instance, a poor man may write about riches, and a feeble person may write stories about courageous heroes. In every art form, we can see the elements of lifestyles of the primitive man. Probably this is one of instances of the level of sophistication of the primitive man.

3. In this [folk] literature, music was secondary; the general populace enjoyed the presentation by watching the physical gestures, facial expressions, and the skilful rendering. Probably, it was the dramatization and musical quality that shaped into an attractive art form.

4. The masses appreciated this form for their own reasons. But there is a need for scholars to study it for a different reason. It is not fair to dismiss this art as free verse, some cock-and-bull stories fabricated by simple folks, and they are devoid of linguistic merit. This literature, studied in the appropriate manner, will no doubt reveal numerous aspects that could contribute to the understanding of anthropology, sociology, ethnography, ethnology, and mythology.

5. It is also important to evaluate the variance between the folk literature and the traditional [elitist] literature.

6. The characteristics of folk literature are: 1. Unknown authorship; 2. Untraceable timeline; 3. Spontaneous evolution from circumstances and out of necessity; 4. Most of it has musical quality and lends itself to gestures; 5. It is not correlated to contemporary scholarship and its conventions; and, 6. It is disseminated exclusively orally and would accept changes and additions freely.

7. The folk literature can be divided into two groups as [1] with and [2] without storyline. From a different perspective it can also be classified as melodic or pure text without melody. In all these cases, the folk literature includes children's stories usually told by grandmas at home—tales of puranas handed down from generation to generation, parables, moral stories, fantasies and ballads singing praise of national heroes. Riddles also fall into this category not because there is a story but they are interesting for the charming imagination that is spread around in a question-answer format.

8. The melody-based folk literature is classified in several ways such as caste-based, calling-based, or deep-rooted in religion.

9. The religion of the simple folks seems to have evolved from the values dictated by ancient matriarchal society. Various Mother Goddesses in villages were the source of power for people's religious beliefs. They were also the springboard for practices like self-immolation, sacrifice, and sorcery. So also the women's traditions in which women wielded powers, sacrificed their lives and became minor goddesses [*perantrandru*]. In course of time, the women's songs at weddings and other rituals also became important parts of the same oral tradition.

I quoted the text at length in order to emphasize the work of Krishnakumari in the field of Folk Literature. Krishnakumari devoted major part of her literary career to collecting the material and studying, organizing the data and publishing them.

An important work of Krishnakumari is her Ph.D. dissertation *Telugu Janapada Geya gaathalu*, [Telugu ballads]. In this dissertation, published in 1977, Krishnakumari discussed elaborately the origin and the development of Telugu ballads in the context of Telugu folk literature. She identified the folk literature as a separate and valuable part of our literatures, compared it to similar literatures in other cultures and countries, and produced a systematic classification chart of ethnology, ethnography and sociology. Further, she has shown how other branches such as

songs and stories included physical gestures and other theatrical paraphernalia in course of time. In this, she also noted that the inclusion of terminology from other languages happened with educated singers of the ballads.

Other chapters include the story elements in the folk songs and ballads, hero-worship, and the linguistic aspects. About seventy ballads she had collected across Andhra Pradesh, from Visakhapatnam to Nellore and Kurnool, vouch for her hard work, particularly when we remember that it was a time when the tape recorders had not come into vogue yet. The glossary at the end of the chapter must be valuable for researchers in the field of folklore.

Krishnakumari believes that the folklore must not be dismissed as the creation of a group of primitive people and thus lacks the skills of the elite. She has postulated powerfully that their folk songs and performances provide us with insights into the civilization of ancient times, a great tool for understanding the evolution of our customs, traditions, and immensely useful in the studies of ethnology, ethnography, religion and sociology.

In her article on the construction of idiom in folklore, Krishnakumari discusses the metamorphosis of language in folklore and the logic underlying such metamorphosis. Incidentally, she discusses the growth of Telugu language as a result of acquiring words from other languages and normalizing into Telugu vocabulary. She adds that Telugu is basically descriptive language. Arguably, we may obtain words from other languages because of the expansion of knowledge base, yet it is equally viable to coin new words from the available vocabulary we have, she insists. For example, *aayakaram* or *varumaanam* may be used for income tax and *aDDu* or *taakaTTu* for mortgage and so on. Krishnakumari insists that we must stop promoting the argument that we do not have correct words in our language. Developing a comprehensive dictionary of the entire literature of Telugu folklore must be undertaken first, she proposes.<sup>[4]</sup>

In an interview with Vanita monthly, Krishnakumari expressed her opinions on current day writing by women. In response to the question that most of today's women writers are being criticized as "not reflecting reality, and advocating escapism," Krishnakumari remarked, "That criticism is not too far from truth. For **women** writers, social consciousness is important. Whatever issue they choose write about, they should first think well, examine it from a scientific perspective, and write the story using their imagination and tell it in a captivating manner. To be able to do that, one must have detailed and scrutinizing outlook, real life experience, and creative skill. When those are in short supply, every small thing becomes an issue and a theme for the story. Many women writers are writing stories, with only numbers in mind, and, without a proper understanding of life, without thinking 'what issue is and what is not'. They are writing without the logical basis of 'how that issue had taken shape and what solution could be offered'. That is what rendering their writings poor and themselves the target for such criticism. Those writings only hurt the society, not help."<sup>[5]</sup>

Basically, Krishnakumari believes that the feminists at present are not delving deep into the underlying problems of the society. They need to scrutinize the issues and find solutions; there is no point in blaming individuals.

Source List:

Krishnakumari, Nayani. *agniputri*. Hyderabad: Author. 1978

... *ayaathaa*. A Collection of short stories.



... *em cheppanu nestam*. Hyderabad: Author. 1988

... *pariseelana*. Hyderabad: Author, 1977

... *parisodhana*. Hyderabad: Andhra Saraswata parishad, 1979.

— *telugu janapada vijnanam: society, culture and literature*. Hyderabad: Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, 2000

Krishnakumari, Nayani. Ed. *jaanapada saraswati*. Hyderabad: janapada sahitya parishat, 1996.

Narasimham, Antati. “*vinaya vijnana seeli Krishnakumari*”. Hyderabad: *Nayani Krishnakumari Sanmana sanchika*. 1990. pp.12-24.

Ramaraju, Biruduraju. and Krishnakumari, Nayani. Eds. *janapada vanjmaya charitra*.

*Vidushi: Nayani Krishnakumari sanmaana sanchika*. Ed. Chekuri Rama Rao. Hyderabad. 1990.

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[1] I translated one of her stories, *cheemalu* [Ants], which is not from either of the anthologies, and included in my anthology, *A Spectrum of My People*, published by Jaico, 2006.

[2] In Andhra Pradesh, marriage between children of different genders—a brother and a sister—is permissible while between children of the same gender (brothers or sisters) is not.

[3] Rama Rao, Chekuri. “*kashmira deepakalika yaatraacaritra kaadu: vachana kavitvaaniki rasagulika..*” *vishushi*. pp. 55-56.

[4] *janapadabhasha – padanirmaanam. janapada Saraswati*. pp.1-8.

[5] *vidushi. goshti with vanita monthly*. p.31.

(Slightly modified version of this article is published in [www.museindia.com](http://www.museindia.com))

## DR. UTUKURI LAKSHMIKANTAMMA

### Eminent Poet, Scholar And Historian

Dr. Utukuri Lakshmikantamma, (1917-1996) was a rare combination of several talents from reciting poetry extempore in Sanskrit and Telugu to martial arts such as fencing, stick fighting and horse riding.

Lakshmikantamma was born on December 21, 1917, in a sophisticated family of scholars and social activists. Her father Nalam Krishna Rao was a reputable poet, journalist, and active participant in the social reform movements of his time. He was the founder-president of Gautami Granthalayam, one of the oldest and highly acclaimed libraries in the state. Her mother Nalam Suseelamma participated in her husband's activities and was the founder of Andhra Mahila Gaana sabha [Andhra Music society]. Her aunt, Battula Kamakshamma, was founder of Arya Seva Sadanam, which was converted to Andhra Yuvati Sanskruta Kalasala [Sanskrit College for Women] later. Against this background, it is no surprise that Lakshmikantamma became actively involved in political and social movements at an early age.

In her childhood, she used to play boys' sports along with her brothers and their friends. At the age of seven, she started learning vocal and veena. By twelve, Lakshmikantamma was already an exhilarating speaker. She used to deliver electrifying speeches and sing patriotic songs. Crowds would hold their breath and listen to her speech or singing.

She was married at thirteen to Utukuri Hayagriva Gupta, a lawyer and six years senior. They had their first child in 1935 but the baby lived only for six months. Of the eleven children the couple had, five children—three boys and two girls—grew up to be well educated and well settled in life.

At eighteen, she graduated from the Sanskrit College run by her aunt Kamakshamma and received the degree, *ubhaya bhashaa praveena*, an attestation of scholarship in two languages, Sanskrit and Telugu. The same year, she was bestowed with two titles, *Telugu molaka* [Telugu sprout] and *vidwat kavayitri* [Poet of excellence]. Lakshmikantamma, who had been named "*Sahiti Rudrama*" [Queen Rudramadevi in literature] by Devulapalli Ramanuja Rao, President of Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, was the proud recipient of ten more titles including *kalaprapoorna* (awarded by Andhra University, 1976), *Andhra saraswati*, *dharma prachaara bharati*, and *sangeeta sahitya kalanidhi*, in addition to honorary doctorate. Mention must be made of two felicitations, *kanakabhishekam* [being showered with gold] and *gajaarohanam* [Elephant ride], which are normally associated with royalty of the past and rather unusual in modern times. To my knowledge, Lakshmikantamma was the only author to be honored with these two felicitations.

She was actively involved in several literary and social organizations such as Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, Telugu Bhasha Samiti, Andhra University Senate, Viswa Hindu Parishat, Andhra Pradesh Arya Vysya Sabha, Gautami Granthalayam library in Rajahmundry, Stri Hitaishini Mandali [Women's Welfare organization in Bapatla], Andhra Yuvati Sanskrit College, Guild of Service, Central Sahitya Akademi, and many more. This list is sufficient to emphasize the wide array of her interests and accomplishments.

Lakshmikantamma possessed a versatile and exhilarating personality. In her autobiography, she stated that she would keep laughing always. Pilaka Ganapati Sastry, who became a famous novelist later, was her teacher for a brief period. At the time, he was still young and shy. Lakshmikantamma was amused while he was teaching *Sakuntala*, a play, and kept laughing. It was disconcerting to Ganapati Sastry. Later, he told her father, Krishna Rao, that, “I used to pick from her laughter, the indepth meaning and beauty of poetry in Kalidasa’s poetry and bless her in my own mind.” (Sahiti Rudrama, p. 43).

Lakshmikantamma’s father was a follower of *Brahma samajam*, which rejects polytheism and promotes one god theory. Her mother Suseelamma believed in Hindu tradition. However she changed some of her religious practices to please her husband, she wrote in her article *pavitra smruthulu* [Pious memories] published in *Yugapurushudu Veeresalingam* published in *Veeresalingam Satajayanti sanchika*, Hyderabad.

Ever since she was a teen, Lakshmikantamma had been living active public life. She was attending public forums, literary meets and conferences and delivering stimulating and scholarly speeches. Writing and publishing came much later, early 1950’s to be specific.

The circumstances surrounding her first book, *Andhra kavayitrulu* are interesting. In 1953, Telugu Bhasha Samiti [Telugu Literary Guild], Madras, announced a competition and invited writers to write a book on Telugu women poets. Lakshmikantamma’s husband, Mr. Gupta, and several friends suggested she should write the book. Lakshmikantamma however was not interested. She said, “Reputable scholar Veeresalingam compiled the book *Telugu kavulu* [Telugu poets] in which he had included about six hundred writers. In it, he mentioned only five or six women poets. If you look carefully, you may find only one hundred poets worth mentioning and possibly one of them would be a woman. I do not want to take that one poet and hold up to the world, and thereby expose that we have no women poets worth mentioning.” (sahiti rudrama, p.81.) Then, one of her close friends, Boddupalli Purushottam suggested that she could at least make an effort to see if there were more women poets. Convinced by his argument, she set out to search for women poets. She traveled to famous libraries in other places like Vetapalem, Madras, and Tanjore, and went through thousands of magazines such as *gruhalakshmi*, *Hindusundari* and literally unearthed 264 women poets who had produced excellent works. Lakshmikantamma’s very first book was a first prize winner in a competition held by a reputable literary guild, Telugu Bhasha Samiti.

In the history of Telugu literature, this book *Andhra Kavayitrulu* is the only comprehensive work on women poets to date. This is being used as a valuable reference tool by research scholars. Arudra, an established writer and researcher, used it as a source for writing about women poets Molla and Mohanangi in his *samagra Andhra sahityam*.

The second edition of *Andhra kavayitrulu*, published in 1980, included only 86 poets. In her preface to the second edition, some of the comments made by the author are worth quoting. Lakshmikantamma stated that she herself was not sure if she could revive the enthusiasm and the style she had evinced while working on the first edition. She was somewhat disappointed by the prevalent perceptions regarding education, language and scholarship in the country. In the past, scholarship was respected. Now (at the time producing the second edition) the shrinking respect for classical poetry in the face of growing interest in fiction is discouraging. Lakshmikantamma also mentioned the cost of paper and printing. Personally, I am sad that money should play such crucial role in publishing the second edition. The second edition included only 86 poets as

opposed to more than 200 poets (I have only the second edition on hand for reference). In any case, I sincerely hope that Andhra Pradesh Akademi or some other literary organization would undertake publication of the full version before it is lost totally. At this writing, the book is out of print. And it is too valuable to neglect.

Having said that, I need to address a couple of other comments on some entries in this work, *Andhra kavayitrulu*. One of them is the authenticity of the claim that Krishnadeva rayalu had a daughter named Mohanangi and she authored a book, *marichi parinayam*. Lakshmikantamma devoted six pages to Mohanangi and *marichi parinayam* in her book. Arudra took this information and incorporated in his book, *samagra Andhra sahityam* [Complete History of Andhra Literature]. However, while writing about Mohanangi, Arudra wrote, “*They say Mohanangi was daughter of Krishnadeva rayalu.*” By shifting the speaker to an unverifiable “they”, it would appear, he was not sure if that was authenticated. He did not clearly contradict Lakshmikantamma’s statement though. In 2002, I met with two reputable scholars, Dr. Nayani Krishnakumari and Dr. Kolavennu Malayavasini. They both stated that there was no verifiable evidence to show that Krishnadeva rayalu had a daughter, and that the authorship of *marichi parinayam* had not been established unequivocally.

A second comment on Lakshmikantamma’s work was by Sangidasu Srinivas. He said that Lakshmikantamma had not given full credit to a poet named Kuppambika (*Andhra Jyothy* September 22, 2008 Vividha page).

My position is scholars usually set parameters for themselves and work within those parameters. Lakshmikantamma went to great lengths, researched all the sources available to her at the time and recorded the data. Other researchers may find more information or different perceptions in course of time. That does not mean that the work done by earlier researcher, whether it is Lakshmikantamma or another scholar, is less significant. It is quite normal for latter researchers to find more evidence or lack thereof and add further to the existing data.

Lakshmikantamma’s works fall broadly into four categories. 1. Classical poetry in Telugu and Sanskrit; 2. Modern poetry; 3. Prose – Essays, fiction and biography, and, 4. Plays.

In Sanskrit, she authored *kanyaka parameswari sthavam*, extempore, in praise of the goddess Kanyaka. It is being recited as invocation prayer in the morning in several temples of Kanyaka across the state. (Vijnan Kumar. Personal correspondence, dated September 22, 2008). Another work of her in Sanskrit is *Devi sthava taraavali* in praise of goddess Devi.

In the book, *naa Telugu Manchala*, [My Telugu Manchala], 98 pages, lakshmikantamma portrays Manchala as a 16-year old, intelligent woman endowed with remarkable beauty and sense of patriotism. The story is popularly known in Andhra Pradesh as that of Balachandrudu, Manchala’s husband. His mother, Prolama would want her son to go to war and earn her the title hero-mother (*veeramaata*) on one hand and, on the other, her maternal instinct would want him to stay home. In a strategic move, she sent him to his wife, Manchala, hoping her beauty would prevail and keep him at home. Manchala on the contrary provoked him in a cleverly manipulative language, and sent him to the battlefield. The verses are written in simple Telugu yet powerful in conveying the various rasas as appropriate in different stages. Lakshmikantamma had mentioned in the preface that there might be some stylistic lapses in terms of meter.

*Kanthi sikharaalu* is a collection of devotional lyrics, imbibing the tenets of Brahma samajam, which she had followed fervently in her teen years. The author stated in her preface that her

inspiration for writing these lyrics was the singing by well-known romantic poet, Devulapalli Krishna Sastry. The language is simple and lucid, which appeal to all, scholars and non-scholars alike.

*Okka chinna divve* [A Small Lamp] is a collection of seventeen long poems, presented as a tribute to Gandhi. In her preface, she stated that she had the opportunity to participate in Gandhi's non-violence movement in her teen years (about 13 to 19 years of age), which contributed immensely in defining her values of patriotism and service. Additionally, she chose the title *A Small Lamp* to accentuate her respect for Gandhi, although not all the lyrics were about Gandhi. It included other topics such as a Telugu New Year day, Diwali, soldiers, and an invitation to youth. Some of them were written in semi-classical style with complex, descriptive phrases, and others in near colloquial style.

To me, this variation in style seems to point to the shift from classical to free verse that has been taking place at the time not only in her writings but in the country in general.

On a slightly different note, I would like to mention Lakshmikantamma's comments on language as stated in her autobiography. She stated that while she was teaching *maha bharata* in Bapatla College, prominent linguistics professor, Bhadriraju Krishnamurthy, attended her classes. Impressed by her scholastic excellence, Krishnamurthy invited her to speak at a literary meet in Ongole. There she went out of the way from lecturing on Maha Bharata and introduced a new argument that Telugu language originated from Dravidian languages. Later Professor Krishnamurthy met with her and obtained detailed information about her argument and incorporated in his course content for second year M.A. (*Sahiti Rudrama*, p. 92-93).

The title of the book, *kanyakamma nivaali*, literally means a tribute to the goddess Kanyaka. Inside however, it is a collection of short verses, 3 lines and the caption *Oh Kanyakamma*. Most of the poems are humorous and/or sarcastic comments on contemporary lifestyle and society. A few of them are serious observations. The author writes in her preface that she was inspired by *Koonalamma padaalu* written by Arudra.

*Saraswati samraayja vaibhavam*, [23 pages], is a one-act play, which incorporated some well-known poems from the published works. It presents on one platform nine women poets, who lived at different times from 13 to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Additionally, the author introduces two secondary characters partly as comic relief in step with the practice in stage plays. The poets recite poems from their best works both in Telugu and Sanskrit.

Lakshmikantamma's works of history and literary criticism include *Andhra kavayitrulu* [Andhra female poets], *Akhila Bharata Kavayitrulu* [All India female poets], *Andhrula keertana kalaa seva* [Service of the Andhra people to music], *naa videsa paryatana anubhavaalu* [My Experiences during my tours to other countries], contributions to Vijnana Sarvasvam [articles in Telugu Encyclopedia], and numerous articles published in reputable journals. Unpublished works as of 1993: *Story of Chandramati* [Children's book], *Sahitya vyasa manjari* [Literary essays], and *Rutambari* [prose ballad].

She also translated Humayun Kabir's essays in English (Our country's history and the lessons learned), and Hindi *dohas* by Kabir, Tulasi Binda and Rahim. She edited classical works, *Molla Ramayanam* and *Vishnu parijata yakshaganam*. She wrote more than one thousand prefaces to books by other writers.

In her autobiography, Lakshmikantamma mentioned that at the beginning of her literary career, she published her poems under the pseudonym 'Krishnakumari'. Soon after, her husband suggested that she should publish her poetry in her own name since they were so good. She did so, although she used yet another pseudonym 'sukanchana' for her story, *Korala madhya koti swargaalu* [Ten million heavens stuck between fangs], included in *kathamandaram*, an anthology of short stories published in 1968.

I think a brief note on her multifarious involvement in women's organizations, social movements and public events, is appropriate here. She was a great speaker, fundraiser, organizer of literary meets and associations, active participant in charitable events, and herself a kind and generous individual. She was a driving force in women writers' conferences at state and national level, had attended international women writers' conferences, and was a sitting member at legislative council in two universities and various literary organs at the state and national level. She was honored at international women writers meets also. (I had the honor of being on stage with Lakshmikantamma at Andhra Women Writers Conferences in 1968 and 1969 and receive mementoes from her.). Sri Potti Sreeramulu Telugu University, Hyderabad, produced a documentary on her life. University of Toronto, Canada, collected complete works of Lakshmikantamma. Her work had been research topic for doctoral dissertation.

I would like to go on a limb here and comment on her activities in her community. In an age when "caste" is considered a bad word, it is pleasing to note Lakshmikantamma's involvement and contribution to *Arya Vysya mahasabha* [Business community in the scheme of societal breakdown based on Hindu beliefs]. She made no apology for being part of her community, and showed how the community spirit could be instrumental in bringing people together. This is particularly relevant in the context of her growing up with her father, who was a staunch Brahmo samaj follower.

In her autobiography, Lakshmikantamma listed some of her writings as "works unable to succeed". I went through the list of books Lakshmikantamma had listed as "not successful".

I am not sure what made her come to that conclusion. For instance, in the same list, she stated that *Naa Telugu Manchala* had received the Telugu University award and had been prescribed as textbook in St. Teresa's college, Eluru. Her Sanskrit poem, *kanyakaa parameswari suprabhatam* is being recited in several temples of Kanyaka as daily morning prayers. That being the case, I must assume she was referring to the success as understood in modern times, which would bring me to comment on the definition of success.

In today's world, success is correlated to sales. A parallel example would be a critically acclaimed movie failing at box office. Probably it is the same with books. Additionally, in Andhra Pradesh, book sales do not always reflect the actual readership. For one thing, buying books is not common in Andhra Pradesh, possibly because of our belief in free dissemination of knowledge, an idea sustained by oral tradition. Secondly, one book bought by one person is read not just by that one person but by other family members and friends also. Thus the number of books sold does not always reflect the number of readers for that one book.

At the risk of repetition, I would like to add a note on Lakshmikantamma's major works. The books, *Andhra kavayitrulu*, first edition featuring pen portraits of more than 200 female poets from 13<sup>th</sup> to 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, *Andhra sahitya vijnana sarvasam*, originally compiled by her father, Krishna Rao, and which she later edited with annotations by her, *Akhila Bharata kavayitrulu* [All

India Women Poets], and *sahiti Rudruma* (Autobiography) remain landmarks in the history of Telugu literature.

This article is not comprehensive but a modest attempt to provide a brief introduction to the accomplishments of a versatile poet of our times. To present a comprehensive analysis of her accomplishments is beyond the scope of this article. My hope is to motivate readers to go to the original sources and learn more about this remarkable woman and poet. Those who are interested in further study of Lakshmikantamma's multifarious personality and work may find the list attached as an addendum to her autobiography, *Sahiti Rudruma* useful.

Additionally, I believe that publication of Lakshmikantamma's complete works with annotations and preserving it for posterity would be a welcome undertaking and service to Telugu literary and cultural service. This is particularly vital in the light of dwindling abilities of the current generation to appreciate classical, semi-classical and modern literature produced by our immediate predecessors.

Most of Lakshmikantamma's works are available online at <http://www.new.dli.ernet.in/>.

I am thankful to Vijnan Kumar, third son of Lakshmikantamma, for kindly lending me the books, which were immensely helpful in writing this article.

Source List (Works by Dr. Utukuri Lakshmikantamma and published by author)

*Andhra kavayitrulu*. 2d ed. 1980.

*Kaanti sikharaalu*. 1978.

*Kanyakamma nivaali*. 1978.

*Oka chinna divve*. 1980

*Naa Telugu Manchala*. 1981.

*Sahiti Rudruma*. 1993.

*Saraswati saamrayja vaibhavam*. 1988.

Other works:

*Samsmruti* (In her memory). Bapatla: Smaraka samiti, 1997.

Suseelamma, Nalam. *Pavitra smruthulu*. Yugapurushudu Veeresalingam. Hyderabad: Kandukuri Veeresalingam smarakotsvamula sangham. n.d. pp. 93-96.

(October, 2008)

## TENNETI HEMALATA

### An Invincible Force In Telugu Literature

In Andhra Pradesh, in nineteen fifties, Tenneti Hemalata, better known, as Lata, entered the arena of Telugu fiction with her novel, *gaali paDagalu, neeTi buDagalu*. “I can proudly say I am the first sensational Woman Writer of the present age of Telugu literature,” she said in a letter addressed to me. (Personal letter, 28 August, 1982).

Hemalata was born on November 15, in Vijayawada, to Nibhanupudi Visalakshi and Narayana Rao. In his book, *Sahitilata*, the author Anjaneya Sarma noted the year of birth as 1932 while Kondamudi Sriramachandra Murthy wrote in his article, *chalaaniki Arunaaachalaaniki Madhya Lata*, as 1935, which appeared in other sources as well. Her full given name was Janaki Rama Krishnaveni Hemalata. She wrote about herself in *Uhaagaanam* 56, partly in jest, I suppose.

At the time God was making me, his hand must have needed rest. After resting for a while, probably he looked for clay to complete the form but did not find it and then he grabbed an *aravinda* flower and a bunch of flames available at hand, put them in me and turned the key on and let me to go to live the life I had received. But, Oh God, this flame is burning the delicacy of the flower. (p.154).

Lata’s ancestors enjoyed a zamindari lifestyle, and Lata was as raised as a darling child in her family. Her father had inherited considerable wealth which he squandered on women, liquor and gambling. He also, it would appear, entertained literary gatherings at home. Lata spent most of her time with her father at these gatherings sporting liquor and literature. Her father used to offer her a sip from his drink occasionally, wrote Anjaneya Sarma. In her later years Lata was criticized by purists for her drinking habit, which she defended in her book, *antarangachitram* (1965). She wrote about liquor in her novels, not as a plausible habit, though. More on this subject later.

Her father died at the young age of 32. At the time, her mother was pregnant with her brother. Lata stated that, in deference to her father, she supported her little brother’s education with her income from writing. It is important to note that Lata was one of the few female writers to earn a substantial income from their writings in the sixties.

Lata lived an unusual lifestyle in many ways. She was married to Tenneti Achyutaramayya, at the age of 9 and he was 16. Her husband’s incurable medical condition, two difficult deliveries, (first son in 1956 and the second in 1963, both cesarean) and financial troubles—all seemed to have given her rare insights into the perplexities and complexities of life. Against these insurmountable odds, it is no surprise that she had learned to take a good hard look at life and the meaning of life and develop a sardonic humor.

In her *antarangachitram*, [self-reflections], she talked about some of her struggles in life, which inspired her to write the stories. The book, *antarangachitram* itself reads like a meandering stream of incoherent thoughts, confusing at times and profound at other, and records the pain she had suffered, and the questions she had been provoked to raise about life and god.



A famous feminist writer, C. Mrunalini, wrote to me in a personal email, that there was lot of confusion in Lata. I asked her to elaborate for which I never received a reply.

In this article, I will try to present my understanding of Lata and her writings against a backdrop of the little data available to me, and you may discern your own conclusions.

Also, please note that I have not read the entire literature produced by Lata. That is beyond the scope of this article. I am recording only my impressions of her writings only from what I have read and/or known personally.

Lata studied extensively Telugu, Sanskrit and English classics at home. She started her career as an announcer at Vijayawada radio station in 1955 or 56. She took to acting while she was there, played notable roles in radio plays and on stage. She was also a singer and a staff writer of radio plays. In a letter addressed to me, Lata wrote “I have written 100 novels, 700 radio plays, 100 short stories, 10 stage dramas, 5 volumes of literary essays (*Uhaagaanam*), 2 volumes of literary criticism (*Vishavruksha khandana*, and *Lata Ramayanam*) and one volume of *Lata vyasaalu*, 25 *charitrakandani chitrakathalu*, 25 *charitra kandani chitra kathalu*, poetry ...”.

This letter was written in 1982. Possibly she had written a few more between 1982 and her death in 1997.

Her awards included: Gruhalakshmi Swarnakankanam in 1963, and an honorary doctorate [*kalaaprapuurna*] by Andhra University. She was honored as “Extraordinary woman” in 1981 by the Government of Andhra Pradesh. She was a member of Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Academy for over 20 years. She was “the only elected woman member to the academy”, She stated in her letter.

Ghatti Anjaneya Sarma, a mechanical engineer by profession and an avid reader of Lata’s writings, published a book, *Sahitilata*, in 1962, wherein he quoted profusely from letters she had received from highly reputable male writers and elite like Bucchibabu, Malladi Narasimha Sastry, Acanta Janakiram, B. Gopala Reddy and Toleti Kanakaraju.

Several writers and readers drew parallels between Lata’s characters and the characters in works by famous western writers like Hemingway, Shaw, Maugham, and C. Scott Fitzgerald. Whether one would be willing to accept these comparisons for what they are worth is beside the point. The fact remains renowned Telugu writers and critics noticed Lata’s talent and accepted her as a notable writer. And they wrote personal letters to her. An interesting factor worth mentioning here is she started receiving them within a decade since she started writing and publishing, which in itself is a tribute to her status as a writer.

Lata started her career as an announcer at the Vijayawada radio station. Soon after that, she started writing plays for the radio. Kondamudi Sriramachandra Murthy mentioned that her first radio play was *silahrudayam* [stone heart] broadcast on Deccan Radio in 1952. Ghatti Anjaneya sarma stated that Lata’s first radio play was *mahabhinishkramanam*, [The Great Exodus], but did not give the date of broadcast. Regardless, the fact remains that Lata launched her literary career at a radio station.

By early nineteen thirties, Telugu fiction was gaining ground as a literary genre. The new emerging story technique incorporated some elements of the earlier writing style; the stories were suffused with vestiges of Sanskrit poetic diction as well as the western story-writing technique. The Romantic poetry of the British writers like Robert Browning, Elizabeth Browning, Byron and Keats influenced Telugu fiction writers in the forties and fifties. And Lata,

like several other writers had read several books in English and was influenced by them. We see the effects of Lata's avid reading in her writings.

Among other things, she also tried to write detective fiction, without success though. She admired Arudra and Kommuri Sambasiva Rao. She particularly wanted to write like Arudra. In her own words, her detective stories turned out more like propaganda material—the thief turned into a man of distinction and the detective into a thief by the time she finished it, as she put it herself.

Lata also tried to paint which again was not a success story. She realized fairly early that she had no talent for the brush. It is notable that later she compared writing to painting, and writer to a painter. She drew a clear distinction between photography and painting. In photography, you click the camera and it captures the scene as is. On the other hand, in painting, the artist adds with each stroke of his brush, a new meaning and a new perspective gradually.

Lata's language is quixotic, awash with imagery and earthy at the same time, with heavy slang at times. It filled with metaphors, sensuous imagery, and even luxurious poetic verbosity at times. She was an admirer of famous singer and song-writer, Mangalampalli Balamurali Krishna. She herself wrote a few lyrics, for which Balamurali Krishna composed tunes. We find this musical quality in such books as *antarangachitram* and *mohanavamsi*, wherein separating the author from the work is impossible.

On another occasion, Lata lying on a hospital bed, while waiting for her second son to be born, she describes her thoughts as follows:

In this scanty life of mine, I have been through numerous experiences—hardships, tears, suffering, happiness, love, and duty; temptation and desire. While grappling with my life and financial problems—amidst all this—I would still travel in first class in airplanes, watching the beauty beyond description and ugliness beyond words—how many times I've seen it in this life? My life is small yet it is puffing up with my experiences, lightening and floating in the air like a balloon. Probably it will burst today.(ARC. p.13)

Her knack for imagery is amazing. Whether it is her sparkling enthusiasm for life or antipathy for the injustices in the society, it is always entrenched in a combination of sarcasm, sharp wit and uncanny humor.

Some of her convictions are a mix of tradition and innovation. Lata possesses a peculiar sense of the anomalies in life, which go beyond the bounds set by any single conviction. In some ways, she would fall right into the category of Telugu romantic/idealistic writers like Tallavajjhala Sivasankara Sastry, Devulapalli Krishnasastry, and Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry, to name but few. And in other instances, she is confrontational like Chalam and Ranganayakamma.

I believe that the anguish Lata had experienced in her personal life set her apart from many writers of her time. Her experiences or anguish defined her perception of life and her technique of storytelling. While other writers used the flowery language to describe their idealistic dreams, Lata used it to drive home the ruthless realities of life.

Lata believed in mystical somewhat platonic love. That is what we see in *Mohanavamsi*. She claimed that she was speaking in abstract terms in *mohanavamsi*; she was not Radha but the concept of Radha [p.106]. She further explains, "My Krishna is a human being. ... My Krishna should not be an egotist ... People may label me immoral, still I would have gone with him, defying all the familial ties. ... I have made plenty of mistakes. Maybe I would stay away from

these mistakes if my Krishna were human. ... But my Krishna is *anantanaariihrudayavarthi* [One who wanders in the hearts of innumerable women]. ... Extremely selfish... Am I jealous? No.. I am worried only about the selfishness incorporated with pain. ... How can he be god if he knew only to take but not give? ... He is good to be worshipped only without asking for returns. ... Maybe I am worshipping him all the same. ... The same thing happened for a second time. It was the fault of the circumstances. The same circumstances would call my love prostitution. ... That is why I turned around and came home. ..But I set fire in that person's heart before I returned. [*antharangachitram*. p.106].

Her usage of diction and metaphors are elusive even when she is speaking in a book supposedly nonfiction about herself. She barely draws a distinction between her fiction and her reality.

An episode described in her *antaranga chitram*, describes this ambiance in her perceptions. She wrote that a local businessman approached her for sex in a rather forthright and primitive fashion. At first, she was surprised; she teased him for a few minutes as was her wont, and then sent him away. She took the situation to make a categorical statement about the life on Vijayawada streets (which apparently was the reason for the man to approach her in that manner).

In this Vijayawada city, this kind of requests and mediations is quite common. There is no evidence of any woman rejecting any man either. Underneath this scenario, money is dancing garishly. ... In fact, that is the way the topography of Vijayawada—surrounded by the river and hills, and streams—they all make it a unique city in the entire state of Andhra Pradesh. I don't think there is another city like this in the entire state. ... And the people of Vijayawada are matchless in making the shorelines of these streams unbearably ugly.

The roads are always crowded. Most of the pillars of society in our town have amassed wealth by running brothel houses only. ....

The second problem in our city is the lorries. There are plenty of lorry drivers who stop them anywhere they please, crawl under the vehicles and fall asleep. ... It is not an exaggeration to say that our roads are laid only for the purpose of those lorries and lorry drivers; they stop their lorries everywhere for repairs, and for others to die freely under those vehicles. ...

On top of all this, there are brothel houses... in each corner of every street ... They are referred to as “companies” respectfully. All these companies are invariably owned by women with rowdy protectors by their side. ...

I quoted this passage to highlight the fact that this account in her nonfiction book is a replica of her description of the Vijayawada streets in her novel, *gaalipadagalu, neetibudagalu*. This may be a simplistic example but I believe that it does point to the authenticity in her novels. She used the same setting and the situations as she perceived them in the life around her. She seemed to have put her heart and soul into her writings whether it is fiction or nonfiction.

Acanta Janakiram was one of her harshest critics to disapprove her style. Referring to his disapproval, Lata wrote, “He [Janakiram] was annoyed by my abrasive and candid language. But what I've written is the truth. He told me several times not to write like that. Probably he was repulsed by my *gaalipadagalu, neetibudagalu* [Kites and Water Bubbles]. I do not think he has forgiven me for that even after I had published *Mohanavamsi* and *Umar Khayyam*. I heard that his nonfiction books, *naa smrutipathamlo* [Down the Path of Memories] and *saaguthunna yatra*

[Journey in Progress] contain more poetry than actuality. In my opinion, Authenticity is more beautiful than poetry.”(*antharangachitram*. 147).

Lata claimed that, contrary to the public opinion, she was not writing about sex and there was no discussion of sex in her books except *gaalipadagalu*, *neetibudagalu*. She added that, “Even in that book, it was meant to cause disgust in the readers but not fondness. Whatever it is, there is plenty of falsehood in his [Janakiram’s] theory of beauty. And I resent falsehood.” (*antharangachitram* 147)

Contrary to her statement however, Lata did write another novel, *raktapankam* [Quagmire of Blood], on the same subject as *gaalipadagalu*, *neetibudagalu*. The second book is a longer version of the same story. The difference lies only in the event that instigated her to write. The basis for *gaalipadagalu*, *neetibudagalu* was her observation of the brothel houses round the corner from her home in Vijayawada. For the second novel, *raktapankam*, the basis was a stack of letters sent to her by a woman who actually lived the horrific life and requested Lata to write the story. The woman’s friend who brought the letters to Lata told her [Lata] that the friend (the main character in the story) was moved by Lata’s earlier novel, *gaalipadagalu*, *neetibudagalu* [Kites and Water Bubbles, 1953], wanted to meet the author personally but could not. For that reason, the woman wrote her story in the form of letters addressed to Lata. And Lata decided to write this novel, defying the angry reprimands of several writers and critics. In the preface to the book, Lata said she had written as it was told in the letters, and changed very little.

Several critics compared her to Chalam for writing these novels. From my perspective, the comparison is not tenable. While the writers dealt with sex in their novels, their approach and their perceptions are distinctly different. Chalam’s views were rooted in his ideology and in that sense his novels were mono-directional. His characters are two dimensional. Readers will know nothing about the characters beyond their engagement in sex. In Lata’s novels, on the other hand, sex is only part of bigger picture. Her characters are alive; they eat, talk to each other, have children, and worry about other things in their daily lives. Her stories tell us stories we all know, and raise questions we are confronted with on a daily basis. Her stories are closer to the life her readers could relate to. A word of caution. Chalam’s novels may not be out of this world but they are monolithic at best.

About the same time as the two novels mentioned above were published, Lata also started writing a series of feature articles in *Andhra Prabha weekly*, under the running title, *Uhaagaanam* [musings] from 1958 to 1963. Its success was unbelievable. Lata became a household name and the readership for the weekly magazine escalated greatly. In a way, it could be her salvation for writing *gaalipadagalu*, *neetibudagalu*. Earlier, I mentioned about the umpteen letters she had received from prominent writers and readers. I believe that *Uhaagaanam* convinced them that she was a gifted writer.

The volume I used for this article is a single volume containing 197 articles in 600 pages, and published in 1978. The publishers stated at the beginning that the book covered umpteen topics such as the poetry and the style of Rabindranath Tagore, Shakespeare’s tragedies, Tolstoy’s humanism, Maupassant’s love scheme, Krishnasastry’s heartening lyrics, social philosophy of Chalam, *maro prapancam* [Another World] of Sri Sri, and several others. Her selection included Telugu, Hindi, Bengali, Tamil, English, translations of Russian and Persian writers and Vedic texts. She also drew on her experience in the movie industry and contacts she had developed as a writer and actress (I think she acted only in one or two movies). (See her comments on acting

noted earlier). The publishers also added that this book included all the issues of the entire world abundantly, and potent questions like: What does “society” mean? In what way the society is related to you?

Each article runs from two to five pages. Basically, the format is: Take a quote from a well-known book or a popular axiom, explain, comment, and describe one or two occurrences from everyday life we all are familiar with, and finish it with a brief recap.

In these articles, Lata comes out as humorous, caustic, sarcastic, ponderous and rambling incoherently at times. They captured a wide range of readership for that very assortment of topics. I, for one, was fascinated by all those quotes from the great books I’d never heard of, the wisdom they contained and the manner in which she illuminated a view or a thought. For me, it was the second best thing for not being able to read the originals.

In this weekly feature, she proved her abilities to put two seemingly incoherent situations in juxtaposition and hold them up for the readers to see the underlying commonality. In the process, she could be impulsive, pondering, confounding, ridiculous, and sarcastic all in one breath.

For instance, in *Uhaagaanam* 129, Lata opens with a popular poem from the great epic, *Maha Bhagavatam* [The Story of Krishna] and goes on with her mystifying questions about God. Then she shifts the somberness to levity as she describes an event from everyday life.

It is about a husband trying to learn to cook while his wife was out of town. He turns the radio on for instructions and the next few lines are just hilarious. He is unaware that the radio is broken and it is broadcasting two stations simultaneously. The result is,

1. *Add water to the dal. After it is cooked, ... put your hands on your waist and take two feet forward.*

—He did so per instructions.

2. *Put a pan on the stove, add oil, ... stand on one foot, look sideways playfully.*

—He did that too.

3. *Walk three feet poised, lean forward, smile... drop little lumps of dough in the hot oil.*

—He followed the instructions.

4. *Hop back three times ...*

As may be expected, the outcome is a disaster and he writes to the radio station that the instructions were messed up.

My [Lata’s] point is, our lives and the universe are comparable to the two broadcasts. That is why I want to tell god that, “Look Mister, your management is hopeless. Why don’t you stop creating for a while. Then we all can have peace for some time.”

But He is not listening and letting the Judgment Day happen. He hides in a corner, and keeps broadcasting two shows simultaneously and tells us to live the best we can. What has he got to lose?

The *Uhaagaanam* articles featured her humor on one level. At another level, she also was capable of initiating challenging dialogues among the elite on topics such as god, traditional values, and religion.

On one occasion, she received a letter from an avowed nonbeliever, Tarakam, in which he stated that Lata's convictions about god in one of her *Uhaagaanam* articles was out of character for her. Lata responded saying that they both (Tarakam and Lata) were on the same page since their objective was the same except for the terminology. "You are calling it Truth and I am calling it God," she said. Then, another prominent writer, Bucchibabu, wrote to Lata further elaborating on various conjectures of the same subject.

The fact that Lata was able to involve the elite of her times in a dialogue on critical matters speaks for her strength as a writer.

Her novel *pathaviheena*.(1971?) is about the disparity between woman's chastity [*pativratyam*] and humanism. In the novel she discusses her views on *pativratyam* [wife's unflinching devotion to her husband] and claims that, unlike in other countries, *pativratyam* is overrated in India. She said she had received 7000 letters during the time the novel was being serialized in *Andhra Prabha* weekly.

In the same preface, she talked about another famous writer, [late] P. Sridevi (of *kalaateeta vyaktulu* fame) and added that Sridevi died because of a mistake she had made. The next comment of Lata is noteworthy. She said, "many people expected me to make the same mistake. But I am a devotee of beauty. ... That is not the reason I did not make the same mistake. I also have soul. ... I have not sacrificed my soul ... I have desires ... and part of it is mischievous like everybody else's ... I am a writer but that does not mean I am not a woman." [ARC p. 105]. This passage seems to indicate that Lata had her share of heartbreaks in real life. Secondly, I am not sure if her comment on Sridevi is tenable but then probably it is irrelevant here.

In her preface to this book, *antharangacitram*, Lata said she spoke only good things about her friends and left out bad things on purpose. Should we give her credit for being discrete? What does it say about her character? And about her sense of propriety and by default her wits? Why did she mention Sridevi at all?

This style of speaking in conundrums is rare in her novels. Beating around the bush is not her style. She was not afraid to take on any writer, male or female.

One notorious episode involving two other prominent writers was about their versions of the great epic *Ramayanam*. For the purpose of clarification, I will recount the story briefly. A jnanapith awardee, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, wrote the epic under the title *Ramayana kalpavruksham* [Ramayana, the celestial tree]. Then, Ranganayakamma, a reputable Marxist writer, wrote the same epic, entitled *Ramayana Vishavruksham* [Ramayana, the poisonous tree] in a confrontational move. Then, Lata wrote another book, *Ramayana Vishavruksha Khandana*, [Rebuttal of *Ramayana Vishavruksham*] challenging Ranganayakamma's version. The three books created a huge commotion in Andhra Pradesh in the eighties polarizing readers, male and female, around each of these writers. Further discussion of this event is beyond the scope of this article but would suffice to say that Lata never hesitated to jump into the fray if occasion called for it.

Lata held strong views about acting and actresses. "I am not used to sugarcoat even in acting," she commented. She said she had to struggle a little when she had to play the wife of another man in a radio play but managed to go through with it. She refused firmly when she had to cry for her (stage)son. "I cannot cry, even in the name of acting, for a child while I have a son in real life." She would not tolerate doubletalk in the name of art either.

She later had come to realize that “the obstacles for actors and actresses to act are only their own sentiments but not their family life.” (ARC p.30-31). Woman remembers her duty to the society and family only after her profession as actress. On the other hand, she who aches for fame and to show off her well-formed figure while grappling with her own insecurities may shroud with morals like sugarcoated pills but can never be an actor. (*antharangachitram*. 31). “Actors and actresses who cannot pronounce aspirated sounds come to participate. No matter how many times Banda garu told them the phrase was *avinaabhaavasambandham*, [inseparable connection] they still say *avi naa baava sambandam* [that is my relationship with my cousin], ... [We announcers] will have to put up with unbearable sounds in the name of classical music,” she commented. (*antharangachitram* 79).

Regarding the relationship between the writer and the writing also, Lata held unambiguous views. She said,

“Usually a novelist will be guided not only by the society in which he is living but also by his own insights and conscience [*antharyam*]. Yet, his experiences, memories and the conclusions drawn from his experiences—all come together and create a common ground of acumen for him and the readers. It will act as telepathy or a telephone wire. That telepathy is the connection between a first rate writer and a well-informed reader.

Additionally. An artist’s imagination may change the proportions and the form of the incident he had seen, rework on the connotation and the display. ... All novels and musings depend on reality to some extent. ....

I will not accept that a great writer would write for entertainment or fame. He also would aim at making the life and his goal as well broader in perspective. There is nothing wrong if he uses his book as a moral sword in his attempt to achieve his goal. ... I believe that there is no writing, never will be one, which is free of the author’s agitation. ... A writer without talent is worse than ordinary person. Nowadays the ordinary person is turning into a writer, which is one more problem.

Once a friend showed two pictures of elephants to a great artist. Both the elephants were the pictures of angry elephants. The artist said, “this is great art since the sculptor carved it with not only the trunk but also the tusk raised. The second one as ordinary and so there is nothing peculiar about it. There is no display of one’s perception. ... If some half-wit calls it [the first] as lacking in realism, that is his problem [*antharangachitram*. 93-94].

Look at any Telugu novel that is not successful, you would notice only a series of aspirations, love, a couple’s movie dialogue, an overbearing gentleman, struggles in a rental property like in a display of dolls ... Life might be like a novel but a novel is never like a grocery store. [98]

She categorically disapproved the pretensions of women who would blame their family life for their failures on stage. She said only second rate women actors live under the delusion that acting was immoral, while in fact the problem was their own lack of talent.

Lata covered a wide range of topics in her novels—harmony at individual or social level, underlying principles of caste, marriage, traditions in other parts of India, beliefs such as ghosts and predictions based on horoscopes, and so on. Here is then the main question: Can we find a common philosophy of Lata from these novels?

Her themes ranged from to streetwalkers, to ghosts, to imaginary coup by gods, to philosophical or theological debate. Lata explained in her prefaces the incidents that lead to her writing the

novels. Each novel was inspired by either her own observation, a book by a famous writer or a brief conversation with another writer of repute. For instance, the much needed changes in society in *tiragabadina devatalu*, [Gods that rebelled] was based faintly on *Time Machine* of H. G. Wells, whose characters defy time, distance, and dimensions of life. *Brahmana pilla* [A Brahmin girl] is about reverse discrimination. She stated that she was not advocating restoration of brahmin superiority but highlighting the negative impact of the eradication of caste system on poor brahmins who needed help. *Niharika* is about the institution of marriage; she questions the acceptance of man having two wives but not woman having two wives in our society..

At the risk of digressing for a moment, I would like to comment on writers in general. Often the writers who write to advocate their ideological perceptions, are deeply rooted in their ideology. (Like Chalam, for instance). All their writings point solely to that one view. And then there are writers like Lata who take each topic and stay focused on that topic, attempting to present several angles of that one topic, offer a more balanced view of the topic and pose potent questions for readers to think. Chalam appealed to the elite and maybe readers fascinated by his portrayal of women's sexuality. Lata reached out a much wider audience with her technique (which included humor, sarcasm and plain talk) as well as her points of view.

Some of topics she dealt with in her novels are:

Closer to home: *Jeevanasravanti*. Her father's financial problems, his use of morphine and his lifestyle were the basis for this novel, she stated in her *Antarangachitram* (p.34). *Mohanavamsi*: Her personal journey.

Stories inspired by her readings and per perception of cultural values: *Bhagavantudi\_pancaayati* [God's court] was inspired by a novel by Somerset Maugham. She said she took some of the characters Maugham had created. She understood only after reading Maugham, that the human nature is not the same as usual at the time of war. Wherever and whenever war happens, the result is always the same—bloodshed and death.

In this novel, she depicted the Tibetan traditions, and environment at the Himalaya mountains. She also apologized for any topographical errors she might have made in regard to the area.

*Dayyaalu\_levu?* – “In general, I don't believe in ghosts. Premchand wrote in his novel, *Nora*, that he believed in the theory of rebirth. Tagore expressed his belief in ghosts in his *Hungry stones*.

Chellapilla Venkatasastri wrote that he believed in the *grahas* and had personally suffered from their displeasure. ... The reason I am saying all this is, we may assume to be real what we are calling baseless fantasies and unreal. We have gotten used to think that the things we don't know don't exist.” (preface )

On Religion and philosophy

*Edi Nityam* [What is Eternal]? Tried to establish that humaneness is more important than religion. It was about a woman writer, Radhamma, who was labeled a “prostitute” regardless she lived righteously. “In reality, I am partial to men; I support women. In this novel, Rajamma's life is heartbreaking.” This is a confusing statement. Is the word “men” in the first part a typo? She did mention about the typographical errors in her books. She quoted her husband saying that she became famous only because of the typos in her books.

*Saptaswaraalu* [The Seven Musical Notes] “Once I heard a story that supposed to have happened in a sanitarium in Mangalagiri. Some of the characters in the story resembled the characters in a



story, “Sanitarium” by Maugham. Similarly, some of the incidents in Shaw’s *Man and Superman*. ... “

Prominent composer-singer, Balamurali Krishna often mentions that the seven notes *are* the foundation for one’s spine, lyrical composition and the harmony in life. I have come to understand that life also reorganizes the notes and sometime strikes a discord and life is a stream of dissonance and harmony. A novelist has no choice but surrender to his own creation: he needs to forget his own existence and become the character in the course of creating each creator. The characters he created turn him into a puppet in their hands. In that play, he will need the help of the seven musical notes. We can’t say whether dance of destruction or eternal bliss is but it continues to agitate him to the end. This *saptaswaraalu* reflects that agitation of mine.

About *Tulasivanam*, Lata said prominent writer Gopichand and she were sipping coffee at a local coffee shop and listened to the story from a woman. Gopichand asked if Lata were interested in writing the story and Lata said he should write it. Eventually, Gopichand died without ever writing the story. Lata’s story explores the belief that *tulasivanam* is present wherever a woman is present. She takes her cue from a mythological character, Tulasi, wife of Jalandhara, who was a cruel demon king. Gods tried to kill him but to no avail. He was shielded by Tulasi’s *pativratyam* and invincible. The only way he could be killed was to seduce Tulasi. Therefore, Vishnu, pretending to be her husband, deprived her of her moral code [*pativratyam*]. Later Vishnu granted her a boon; and she became a plant to be worshipped by women seeking exemplary life eternally.

Now the question, it is true that money matters but is it justifiable to grow marijuana in a tulasi patch? Marijuana sedates the senses, numbs the conscience. It may provide a temporary solace but no healthy remedy. Tulasi on the other hand has medicinal value, it is wholesome.”

Her experimental writing: Love stories

By her own admission, she wrote some sort of love stories like *vaitariniteeram* in the beginning. Later she divested herself of the western influence. But she wrote *Vaitariniteeram* in response to a suggestion from younger generation readers, who had gotten used to reading the novels by other female writers, who were lifting stories from Herald Robbins, Barbara Cartland and Mills and Boon (Lata noted it as ‘Bouquet’ but I believe Boon is the correct word.). It was serialized in *sowmya* monthly.

Lata said her characters lead her to the conclusion; they appear in her dreams and tell their stories. In the case of *niharika* [Mirage] it took a couple of months before the main character, Saradadevi told her the complete story. Within those two months, lying on bed in a nursing home, she had finished two more novels, *bhagavantudi panchayati* and *Omar Khayam*.

All the five novels carry the publication date of 1963. To me, writing five novels with a so wide range of themes is remarkable. Then the question is: In doing so, did she succeed in becoming an esteemed writer? I have no statistical data, but in view of her renown, I’d say yes, she remains an important writer of our times.

In a final note, I would like to quote Lata’s comments on contemporary female writers, that, “Many female writers are afraid that they’ll be forgotten if they don’t keep publishing but I don’t have any such fears,” she said.

I would like to quote a well-informed writer, J. K. Mohana Rao, who wrote, on hearing of Lata’s death, “I am saddened to hear the demise of Tanneti HemaLATA. ... I was introduced to Lata

through Andhra Prabha. She used to contribute a column called UhaagaanaM. It used to be down-to-earth and yet poetic. ... I can call her a mix of Bucchi Babu and Chalam. She fought for one half of the oppressed in society, viz., the women.... She always used to write with a certain enchantment and elan that is not easy to surpass or imitate. Lata reminds me of my youth, my return to Telugu literature (particularly novels) after a break, and my rethinking about women, relationships and a sense of poetry in many activities of our daily lives.”

I can't think of a better tribute to a writer who took the world by the horns in the early nineteen fifties.

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## DR. ARUDRA

### A Relentless Researcher And People's Poet

**Bhagavatula Sankara Sastry**, best known as Arudra, devoted his life to write for the ordinary people without compromising his integrity. He proved successfully that poetry in classical meter could be written in colloquial Telugu and produce valuable literature. He did not believe in academic degrees. He researched incessantly and brought valuable information on a wide variety of topics to the public.

Arudra [Bhagavatula Sadasiva Sankara Sastry] was born in Visakhapatnam in 1925. He moved to Vizianagaram in 1941 for college studies. During this period, he met with literary stalwarts Chaganti Somayajulu and Ronanki Appalaswamy who became powerful forces in molding his literary pursuits and helped to define his literary values in the years to come.

Early in life, Arudra became involved in the political movements. He left college and joined the Air Force in 1943. He moved to Madras in 1947, where he served on the editorial board of a popular magazine Anandavani for two years. Then returned to Visakhapatnam where he was a photographer for a short period. In 1949, he returned to Madras. He always believed that journalism had “adventure value.” He tried for a job in journalism and ended with script and lyric writing in the movies.

Arudra did not care for academic degrees but his incessant thirst for knowledge and acquiring it in the traditional method was notable. When he wanted to learn the fundamentals of Telugu grammar, he went to the highly reputable grammarian, Ravuri Doraiswamy Sarma. Interestingly, at the end of three years, however, Arudra changed Doraiswamy Sarma's perceptions of the importance of colloquial Telugu. He proved to be a rare student who could convert the teacher and a staunch classicist into an advocate of colloquial language.

Arudra pursued his interest in literature and fine arts on his own and with unusual fervor. He studied not only classics in Telugu literature but also in other languages, and other fields such as dance, music, magic and palmistry. Top ranking artists in music and dance would consult Arudra for interpretation and explanations. He was well versed in the games of chess and bridge. Sri Venkateswara University, Tirupati, conferred an honorary doctorate of letters on Arudra in 1978. Andhra University honored him with Kalaprapoorna title. Arudra's works had been subjects for several doctoral dissertations and M. Lit. Degrees. His sixtieth birthday was celebrated on a grand scale in Chennai in 1985. Marking his seventieth birthday, East and West Godavari districts organized huge literary meets. He was truly a people's poet in every sense of the term.

Arudra met Ramalakshmi, a well-known writer and critic, while she was working at the Telugu swatantra office as editor of the English section of the magazine. They got married in 1954. They have three daughters and one adopted daughter.

Arudra's first poem, *lohavihangaalu* [Metal Eagles] written in 1942 caught the eye of the elitists. During the Second World War, the Japanese airplanes dropped bombs on the Visakhapatnam harbor and people dispersed in panic. Arudra wrote the poem depicting the horrific scene.

Arudra strongly believed in two principles: First, literature must be able to stimulate people, and secondly, it must be written in a language that is intelligible to all the readers, the elite and the

ordinary readers. In a personal letter written to me in 1981, Arudra said, “Our ancient poets said people’s tongues are the palm leaves that safeguard the literature. Now the hearts of the people are the tape recorders that preserve literature.”

Arudra had experimented and produced valuable works in every literary genre—several techniques in poetry, literary history, short stories, detective novels, stage and radio plays, essays, lyrics and scripts for movies. Several of his lyrics and poems are still fresh in the hearts of the people.

The two most important works that gave him a permanent place in the history of Telugu literature are *Samagra Andhra Sahityam* [A Comprehensive Literary History of the Andhra People] and *Tvamevaaham*, [You are I –an aphorism from Upanishads]. The two works left an indelible mark on the minds and in the hearts of Telugu people.

His voluminous literature may be categorized into three areas: 1. works based on research, 2. creative writings (poetry, fiction, etc), and 3. lyrics and poetry written in a lighter vein. Further, his articles fall into the following categories: articles [1] related to the ancient and modern literature; [2] on fine arts and folk arts; [3] social reformers and others worked in the area; [4] movie industry; and, [5] miscellaneous.

Arudra mentioned in one of his essays an incident that led to working on his major work, *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*. It was triggered by a brief conversation the author had with B. N. Reddy, a prominent movie producer. Arudra casually suggested to Reddy to make a movie on the famous poet Tikkana. Reddy asked Arudra to see if there was enough material to make a movie.

Arudra, as his wont, started researching the subject, and was fascinated by the enormous amount of material he had come across in the process. The movie did not happen but his research, which extended over a period of sixteen years, resulted in the said volumes. “The information useful for the race [of the Telugu people] must not be put away,” he told himself, and set out to publish it in a series of volumes. The set of twelve volumes speaks of not only Arudra’s thirst for knowledge and tenacity but also his commitment to the Telugu race. Arudra’s commitment is evident from his comment that he quit smoking in order to continue his reading in the library uninterrupted.

The history of the publication of his monumental work, *Samagra Andhra Sahityam* [Comprehensive Literary History of the Andhra people], is worth mentioning here. In the sixties, M. Seshachalam & Company created a project under the banner “*intinti granthalayam* [Library in every home]. Under the project, subscribers received books on a monthly basis. The company agreed to publish *Samagra Andhra Sahityam* in 12 volumes between 1965 and 1968. Arudra worked day and night incessantly to meet the publishers’ guidelines, sometimes modifying the content to fit the size. After the 12th volume, the author realized that there was information for one more volume to cover the modern period. His health however held him back for a while. The first edition of 12 volumes sold out quickly. In 1988, Prajasakti publishers, Vijayawada, undertook to reprint the set. This time the author had the opportunity to include the details he had left out the first time and the volume on the modern period (volume 13). The second edition was published in 1991. Once again, the books were sold out quickly. In 2002, Ramalakshmi approached Andhra Pradesh Sahitya Akademi, and they agreed to publish the entire work in four volumes. At this writing, volume 1 of this set is out of print.

*Samagra Andhra Sahityam* covering the period from the early Chalukya period (the eighth century to the British rule (the mid-nineteenth century) is not just a laundry list of authors' names and their works. In his preface, the author mentioned that history of any country encompasses the literary history as well as social history. To that end, Arudra included umpteen particulars about the authors, their works, critiques and the minutiae of daily life in the period under discussion.

An important characteristic of these volumes is the language. Arudra wrote in colloquial Telugu in accordance with his belief that literature is for the people. kavisamrat Viswanatha Satyanarayana was strongly opposed to this view. It would appear that Satyanarayana was disappointed that Arudra did not write them in classical Telugu.

The second book, *tvamevaaham* [You are I, an upanishadic axiom] is one of the most widely received poetry volume in the history of modern Telugu literature. It is a powerful statement on the atrocities committed by the Razakars under the Nizam regime in 1948. While the people protested against the Nizam rule, the razakars committed unspeakable crimes. It was a hell let loose.

In his preface, the author stated that he was inspired by a news item published in *krishnapatrika*, under the banner *naakaa siggu, naa stritvam enaaDo poyindi* [Me, ashamed? My femininity was long gone]. It narrated the story of a woman who removed her clothes in a third class railway compartment in a leisurely fashion. One of the passengers asked her if she were not ashamed to do so. She replied, "Am I ashamed? How can I be? I was tied to a tree for twelve days in this manner by the razakars, the cronies of the Nizam, and was raped repeatedly. You did nothing. You should be ashamed". Several poets of Andhra Pradesh responded to the appalling incident and the atrocities. Arudra's poem set him apart from the others for his technique and its commanding tone.

The technique Arudra developed to write his poetry included rhyming couplets and extensive borrowing freely from Sanskrit, English and Urdu to make his point. Unlike other poets, Arudra did not use Sanskrit phraseology to impress the elite. He used them to create a stronger sense of the milieu.

The book in several cantos using the clock-related terminology such as hours, minutes, seconds, water clock, and sand clock, depicts in analogous meter the atrocities and violence that had occurred during that period.

In the preface to the book, Arudra said he originally called it *Telangana*. When he showed it to Sri Sri for his opinion, Sri Sri said he was very pleased with the poem. Regarding the title, Sri Sri said, "Giving the title *Telangana* to a book on *Telangana* is like drawing a picture of an elephant and call it elephant. It does not convey the essential message of the poem." Arudra then changed it to the current title.

Let me digress here for a moment. Possibly the above incident could be the last when Arudra sought Sri Sri's opinion. In terms of ideologies, Arudra moved away from Sri Sri soon enough. While Sri Sri remained strictly adhered to his Marxist principles, Arudra studied the Marxist and other ideologies and imbibed the spirit of those principles. He then developed his own philosophy and remained a man of his own convictions.

The book, *tvamevaaham*, was published in a biweekly magazine, *Telugu swatantra*, in 1949. I read it in the early fifties. I was not aware of the connotation and I did not understand every word of it, yet I was taken by the ambiance. It was one of my favorite readings at the time. The book

has become an important part of history for its political and social context. That I came to know much later.

The public reception of the book was not immediate though. Nearly four years later, in a letter to Dasarathi, Arudra stated that he [Dasarathi] was the first to make constructive comments on the book. Dasarathi praised it as unique for its style and content. The review was published in Bharati monthly in 1953.

Arudra's second daughter, Lalita, is a writer in her own right. She commented on *tvamevaaham* and translated one of the poems from the book. I was glad to note that her appreciation of the book was similar to mine. There is a notable difference of course. She is Arudra's daughter and thus has a better sense of the poetic quality in it. You can find Lalita's comments and the translation on her blog, <http://lalitalarking.blogspot.com>. Click on the October 2007 folder and scroll down to The Train You Intended to Take.

Among his other anthologies of poetry, *koonalamma padaalu* deserves special mention. In his preface, the author mentioned that he had come across an article by Veturi Prabhakara Sastry on the eight poems with the caption *O Koonalammaa!* In Bharati monthly in 1930. Arudra stated, "When I first read them, I was excited; the poems moved me and provoked me. The divine skill imbibed in these poems mesmerized me. ... I scrutinized them closely and, after understanding the depth of meaning in those poems, decided to write similar poems and bring them to light."

Arudra researched further and found that the time when these were written could not be established with certainty. He was however certain that they were being sung in the 17th century. Arudra arrived at two premises: 1. they were probably not written by Koonalamma herself but written by someone else as a tribute to Koonalamma, 2. they followed a particular type of meter that included rhyming the first three lines and ending with the caption, *O Koonalamma* as the 4th line. He discussed the meter in detail in this preface to this book. (I would not want to go into that area, since it is all Greek and Latin to me.)

Here are a couple of poems I translated. Of course, the original poems are more fascinating.

Andhra folks' passion,

Ghosh, is a load

That never lives to see the end

Oh Koonalamma.

The debt keeps growing

The shoe keeps stinging

It is a flame unavailable for viewing

Oh Koonalamma.

Arudra's poetry in lighter vein is equally captivating. His poems under titles, *intinti pajyaalu* and *America intinti pajyaalu* illustrate the humorous side of events in our daily lives—his comments on the everyday realities and lifestyles. His humorous side is obvious even in the spelling of the title. His spelling was in step with the prevalent pronunciation at a time when it was not common in written texts.

Arudra is a great juggler of words. It is not an exaggeration to state that his rhyme brought him closer to the vast majority of readers. In his preface to the book, he mentioned that he modeled these poems, *intinti pajyaalu*, on the poetry of Ogden Nashe. Aptly, he stated,

American poet, Ogden Nashe  
Had made plenty of cash,  
As for me, all I wish for  
Is a nod of *sehbash*

*Here are a couple of poems from intinti pajyaalu.*

Cricket match  
To tell the truth, I cannot play cricket  
Yet, for every match, I buy the ticket  
Between Umrigar, Bordey and Desai, I cannot tell the difference  
Not even when I'm close by.  
That's why, when our team is fielding  
I shout aloud, "Milka Singh"  
He wears a turban and a beard  
That's how I remember him well.  
History on the move:  
The hare and the tortoise made a wager  
I'll tell you how the tortoise won the race  
He walked the one hundred miles  
While the hare switched two trains

The book, *America intinti pajyaalu* [Poems in homes in America] depicts similar incidents in the homes of Telugu people in America. Personally, I think the real Telugu humor did not seep through in these poems as well as its precedent. Again, it could be my frame of mind.

Arudra wrote another book of poems, *madhyakkaralu*, to prove his argument that writing metrical poetry need not be laden heavily with meandering Sanskrit phraseology. Earlier, Viswanatha Satyanarayana published a volume entitled *viswanatha madhyakkaralu*, which received Sahitya Akademi award. Arudra called his book *suddha madhyakkaralu*, highlighting that his technique was the pure form and yet intelligible to all readers. His intent was to show that the ancient principles of poetics were just as suitable for colloquial Telugu as the classical Telugu.

In addition to his *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*, Arudra had written numerous essays over a period of fifty years. Most of them were published in anthologies such as *mahaneeyulu* [Great Personalities], *vyaasapeetham* [Articles on a wide variety of topics including history, classics, society, journalism, and movies], *Ramudiki Sita Emavutundi* [How Sita is related to Rama], temple sculpture, and *prajakalalu* and *pragativaadulu* [Folk arts and Freethinkers].

The book, *Ramudiki Sita emavutundi* is one of his works that explains his mode of thinking. In this book, he takes a popular adage, which implies that the question, how is Sita related to Rama, is idiotic since the answer is obvious; a question nobody in his right mind would ask. Arudra however takes the question seriously, and gives numerous examples from various texts in other cultures and other countries to show that the answer is more complex than appears to be. The book clearly gives a lot for the reader to wonder about and think.

In 1999, Ramalakshmi has decided to publish all the works of Arudra. One of them is a collection of critical essays on a wide variety of topics, entitled *vyasapeetham* the second imprint. The essays range from Vedic times to the beliefs and practices in modern times—legends and facts surrounding various mythological characters such as Krishna, Sita, Draupadi, various issues as described in Vedas, women's position in society, customs at various times, persons of importance in the movie industry, the state of today's journalism, and so on. The volume speaks of Arudra's tenacious pursuit of knowledge on one hand and his ability to present the topics in a language that is appealing to the widest audience. Arudra excels in capturing his audience's attention.

In some case, the articles clarify some of the popular notions. Others provide additional information and educate the readers. In his article on what the word putrika meant, Arudra points out that the word was originally meant to refer to the daughter who had no brothers. He quoted ancient texts such as Manu dharmasastra, Vedas, and modern Vedic authorities (Panchagnula Adinarayana Sastry) and western scholars (Sir Moniere Williams) to support his view. He also quotes from *Women in the Vedic Age* by Sakuntala rao Sastry, wherein Mrs. Sakuntala rao comments, "After the male domination came into play, the woman without brothers was labeled putrika and declared unfit for marriage. Sayanacharya who had written commentary on Vedas attributed the 14th century A.D. mode of thinking to the Vedic period". Arudra would append his own views wherever he felt strongly about the issue on hand. For instance, in the above article, he asked why today's traditionalists accept the Vedas as authoritative, yet would not allow the same rights to women that had been allowed in the Vedic period (p.58).

*Vemanna Vedam* is another valuable work of Arudra. Vemana, a 14th century poet, is highly respected for his keen insights into the customs of society and pungent remarks. Arudra interpreted these poems, quoting extensively from the Vedas and other scholarly works. His commentary adds immensely to the study of Vemana's poems.

Arudra has written books on palmistry, hand gestures in bharatanatyam, people and folk arts, and on chess among several others.

The book, *hastalakshanam*, is a small book in which Arudra wrote poems illustrating the hand gestures in classical dance. He worked closely with Padma Subrahmanyam, a famous dancer, to explain the underlying philosophy.

In the early eighties, I started working on Telugu writers for a doctoral dissertation (never finished). In that context, I contacted several writers. Arudra was kind enough to respond to my questions. I am happy I could share his thoughts with you at this late date.

Arudra in his own words: In a letter dated July 28, 1981, Arudra wrote:

1. Prior to entering the movie industry, I have gained the knowledge of writing good lyrics from the standpoint of literary technique. After getting into the movies, I understood the



technique from the standpoint of music. I understood specifically how to use the rhyme and assonance. My technique improved because of the movies, but not hurt.

2. The movie industry is only a business in the world of capitalist society. Producers make movies only to make money. If a competent director has good taste, he will be able to create a movie that does not fall below the standard. Writer is a part of this team. This is a collaborative effort.

3. When a writer writes a lyric and publishes in a magazine, a reader reads it, sitting at home. Between him and a moviegoer, there is a big difference. These differences are inevitable in today's society. As long as there is a difference between the literature that is read and the one that is heard, there will also be a difference between literary technique and the literature of the movies. For example, once, I read a poem aloud in a literary meet. It opens on the lines, "Is this the country where Gandhi was born?" Later, there was an occasion where I had to write the same as a lyric for a movie. The views were the same but the way it was expressed had to be changed. I did it myself. One of the trade secrets of the artist is to be able to change the technique according to the medium. The difference between the stage play and the screenplay is the same as the literary technique and the movie technique. It is just as crucial.

4. I have written numerous movie songs. I was never ashamed of the songs I have written for the movies. On the other hand, I am proud of them. I have been working in the industry for 32 years now (1981) that is about 3200 over the years. On average, I have been writing one hundred songs per year, maybe more. Some of these songs have become very popular. A few dozens of them are still being heard from individual singers, and broadcast on radio and television even now. Our ancient poets said that we might call them lyrics only those which act as the palm leaves for the tongues of the people. I am content that I have written songs that are tape recorders for the hearts of the people.

5. I will not be disappointed if a producer or director asks me to change the lines. Movie songs require fixing. The song must be suitable for the episode and the presentation of it in the movie. Without thinking about the episode, the writer might imagine it in a different way. Then one of them would have to change his mode of thinking. It is appropriate for the writer to modify the song. How can a writer satisfy hundreds and thousands of audience, if he cannot satisfy the producer and the director?

6. There was no occasion I had to write songs that were not consistent with my outlook.

7. There were occasions when the storyline was changed based on my song. Director Tilak used to change the storyline based on the songs I had written. Once I wrote a song, *raayinaina kaaka pothine* [Why I have not turned into a rock at least?] for a private recording. Bapu heard it and was so pleased he created a scene in his movie *goranta deepam*. They do ask for my suggestions as well.

8. To entertain the public is also one of the functions of literature. I think this can be attained through movie songs to a great extent. I was very pleased when I heard one of my songs from the movie *premalekhalu*, sung by workers at the railway station by coal lines. Same way, when people, whom I've never met before, would approach me on the railway platform or some other place and congratulate me for the song *muthemanta pasupu*. Where is greater joy than knowing that my song has given them on the spot respite for a few minutes? [*Sadyah eva nivruthi.*]

9. My ideology is scientific equality. I am including this in the movies whenever possible in an easily understandable, colloquial Telugu and using popular adages, but not with stock phrases. Nevertheless, the producer would allow the premise of equality only if it fits today's business framework. In today's template movies liberalism is nil. The views in the songs make an impression only when the entire movie resonates with liberalism. Otherwise, it will be like the juice and solids remain separate.

Additionally, Arudra included his answer to a question I did not answer. He said, "my answer to the question you did not ask is:

In the Telugu movie industry, numerous literary stalwarts such as Veluri Sivarama sastry, Viswanatha Satyanarayana, and Viswanatha Kaviraju, have written lyrics. So also progressive writers like Devulapalli, Sri Sri, Dasarathi, Si.Na.Re, and Atreya. Before the formation of Abhyudaya Rachayitala Sangham in 1947, we used to argue that we should write in a language that is intelligible to all the people. Yet we filled our writings with phrases built on Sanskrit phraseology [*tatsamabhuuyishtamaina*] that was incomprehensible to the people. After joining the movie industry, the language has taken the forms of *desyam* [native], *aicchikam* [random], and *graameenam* [rural]. Nowadays, nobody is writing lyrics filled with Sanskrit phrases, unless it is a purana movie. This is a linguistic revolution.

And in his second letter dated October 21, 1981, he added, "Writing for the movies is my vocation. Literature is my passion. It is morally untenable to yield to shameful acts in the name of one's work. For that reason, I will never do anything that is dishonorable voluntarily.

In literature, a disparity between the writer and reader leads to communication gap. That happened at the time of *tvamevaaham* was published. Even a great poet like Bhartruhari despaired that *jeernamange subhashitam*. [Good words are lost in oneself for want of receptive audience.] Kalidasu lost heart and said that *puraanamiteva na saadhu sarvam*. [Not everything is commendable because it is old]. Bhavabhuti had to tell himself *vipulaa ca prithvee* [The world is expansive] and be content with it. Chemakura Venkanna was annoyed that *ee gati racyincireni samakaalikulu meccharu gadaa* [Contemporaries do not appreciate regardless in whatever style you write].

"For those who introduce innovative trends, this problem is inevitable. For the writers who think that they are right and the people are idiots, there is no problem, none whatsoever, for instance, Viswanatha. I am people's writer. Real writer is a person of the society he lives in [*sanghajeevi*]. The purpose of literature is inherent in the society's activities. The elite may hold the same disrespectful view towards the movie writings as their view towards folk songs. The epics live on paper. Lyrics live on the tongues of the people. Songs sung along with pestle and mortars are the songs. Now I am very happy that my writings are within the reach of the ordinary people."

To conclude, I would like to quote the last lines in the volume 13 of *Samagra Andhra Sahityam*. Arudra stated that in recording any literary history, the modern period begins but does not end. ... In a continuing tradition, the details of movements and the episodes are only comas and semicolons ... but there will be no full stops."

Arudra left his legacy for Telugu people to continue. As long as the history is in the making, the legacy of Arudra will remain in the hearts and on the minds of Telugu people.

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3. Fiction

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Complete list of Arudra's works is available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Arudra>

## DYNAMICS OF TRANSCULTURAL TRANSFERENCE: TRANSLATING FROM TELUGU INTO ENGLISH

After arriving in the U.S. in 1973, I became intensely aware of the incongruities on the surface in the two cultures—American and Indian—and the commonalities beneath. Struck by culture shock, and encouraged by my American friends, I launched the website, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net), in an attempt to demystify the stereotypical perceptions while identifying the underlying commonalities in our beliefs and customs. Reasons developed in course of time include the interests of the current generation Telugu youth, who cannot read Telugu script and have gotten used to English so well that they are comfortable reading the stories in English. Additionally, the site has been recognized as a valuable source for scholars in multicultural education and Telugu literature by the academy globally.

Basically, this article addresses the criteria for selecting the stories, which reflect our intrinsic values as opposed to the values newly developed in recent times, and those that explain the age-old customs specific to Telugu culture. Another criterion has been whether a given story lends itself to translation reasonably well.

Secondly, the problematic areas in translation discussed in this article are: Native flavor, dialectal variations, phrases peculiar to Telugu, proverbs (those that are easily translatable and those that are not), humor, and structure; and the Linguistic areas: Pronouns, forms of address, and grammar, especially tense. Valuable experiences have been gained from interaction with the authors of source texts and critical scrutiny of the submissions of translators to our website.

In the summer of 1978, I started teaching Telugu as Second Language at the university of Wisconsin-Madison. While working with the students and talking with my friends at the university, I noticed the stereotypical perceptions prevalent in America. The repeatedly asked questions reminded me of the typecasting we, the Telugu people, do of Americans. It made me think of ways to dispel some of the misconceptions at least. Being a writer, I wanted to pass on our stories, which would reflect the fundamental principles we have cherished in our culture and the broader spectrum of our writers to the non-Telugu readers in the process.

Before launching my website, I decided to research what was available in translations. My findings confirmed my belief that Telugu fiction had been conspicuous by its absence on the international literary scene. Very little Telugu fiction was available in the media and on the Internet, although there was considerable amount of fiction from other Indian languages. Secondly, there was no systematic attempt to illustrate the broad range of our writers in a coherent and comprehensive manner. Thirdly, the translations were always of the stories by a few reputable authors, which meant ignoring other excellent stories by other writers. Fourth, in the published translations, there seemed to be an assumption that the readers were familiar with our language and culture. To put it in another way, the academic journals and the web magazines had been catering either to the pan-Indian readers or to the foreign readers familiar with Indian culture. In short, there had been no well-organized effort to translate modern Telugu fiction in a cohesive manner. To my knowledge, the published works in translation had not reached the

readers outside India, particularly outside the academy. Further, the academy appeared to be more focused on ancient poetry, especially the romantic poetry in translations to the detriment of fiction. I was convinced that there was a dire need to present Telugu fiction in English to the global audience, especially those who had not been familiar with our language and culture. With that in mind, I launched the website, [thulika.net](http://thulika.net) in June 2001, creating a platform exclusively devoted to disseminating modern Telugu fiction, and introducing the broader spectrum of the intellectual richness and the talent of several writers from Andhra Pradesh to the global audience.

My next step was to examine the readers' preferences. From what I gathered, people read stories from another culture not only to appreciate the intellectual perceptions prevalent in that country but also to draw parallels from everyday lives and understand how the problems in question were dealt with in the other cultures. Suffering is universal; happiness is universal; so also a host of other issues in human life. One good example is marriage. Americans are curious about arranged marriages in our country and our media plays up to their curiosity. Sad but true is the fact that most of these stories make no attempt to explain the underlying principle of the arranged marriages or why the custom was put in place to begin with, how it has been playing out in times of adversity and its metamorphosis in modern times. After watching the wedding process in America, I have concluded that, in a marriage, the most important aspect is not how you arrive there but what you would do to make it work. In both the cultures keeping marriage together is hard work. With this kind of debate going in my head, I made my primary goal not to criticize one culture or the other but to draw the analogues and highlight the commonalities in human psyche.

Translations are hard. Crosscultural translations are harder. There is no translation, certainly no word for word translation, which permits us to switch back and forth with mechanical precision. In my interaction with some of the readers, I have noticed that native speakers and writers often tend to retranslate, unconsciously I might add, as they continue reading a translation. Usually it shows in their comments. I believe that, in order to appreciate a translation, the reader must be willing to accept certain prerequisites. For a foreign reader, it is the need to leave his/her preconceived notions about the other culture and start afresh. For a native reader, it is the willingness to beware that the translation has been done for a reader, who cannot read the original in Telugu and is unfamiliar with the Telugu language and culture. Personally, I think crosscultural translation is transcreation and the translator is invariably a creative writer.

There are several elements to consider in translating for crosscultural audience. I will briefly discuss each of these aspects such as dialectal variations, native flavor, structure, phrases peculiar to Telugu, proverbs, and grammar comprising tense, pronouns, and proper nouns. Humor is one more element that requires close attention with reference to the target audience.

The first step would be to identify the peculiarities of the source language and the target language. Clearly, the language I learned at Andhra University, Waltair, India, is not sufficient for translating for American readers. If I want the Americans to read my translations, I need to give the stories to them in American English. At the beginning, I started out with seeking advice from my American friends on my translations. One of them was Dr. Abbie Ziffren, who had been a great help in fine-tuning my language. In 1982, my first translation, "Man, Woman,"

[Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry, “mogavaadu, aadamanishi”] was published in the Journal of South Asia Literatures. (1982)

Soon enough, I realized that there was no consensus regarding the “correct” usage. Each time, I corrected the text according to one person’s suggestions, and showed it to another friend, there were more corrections. Sometimes, I would have to “do and undo” the same words back and forth. Finally, I realized that, while the American English had its distinctive features, there were always variations in the preferences of each person regarding how a word was used or how a sentence was constructed.

### **Selection Criteria**

Initially, my selections were based on the premise stated above, namely, introducing the fundamental philosophy underling our mode of thinking, lifestyles and customs. Therefore, I turned my attention invariably to the stories written in the nineteen forties, fifties and sixties—during which period Telugu fiction flourished. As my work progressed, I continued to redefine and fine-tune my criteria for selection.

My second criterion has been the ease of diction, which is controversial in itself, and, which is explained by the translation process illustrated below. Third is the literary value and/or the author’s unique style. As mentioned earlier, I strongly believe that it is important to introduce not only the most prominent writers but also other good writers in order to illustrate the breadth of our artistic accomplishment and for a better understanding of our cultural values.

Finally, I did not care for the stories focused on specific ideologies. I feel that such stories have received extensive exposure in other journals and websites and there is no need for me to rehash the same. However, on occasion, I would make exception as in the case of the story “The Rite of sacrifice” (Rama Rao. Yajnam.). Further discussion follows under the subheading Structure.

### **Dialectal and regional variations**

In Andhra Pradesh, the dialectal variations are based on several aspects. They vary not only from region to region, but also, within a given region, there are variations based on caste, calling, education and economic status. Some families may even develop their own language from a mix of a few dialects. The differences in regional dialects such as Chittoor, Telangana and Coastal Andhra are accepted as dialects. Then there are also variations in spelling of specific words, which come into play, defying the regional and caste practices.

There is no consensus concerning how to handle the dialectal variations in translation. A well-known dramatist and actor, Ravi Kondala Rao argued that it would be impossible to impart the native flavor of the source language effectively into another language and therefore translations would be pointless (Kondala Rao. Aa sogasu vastundaa? [Can that beauty be achieved {in a translation}])? Apparently, Kondala Rao has missed the one point, which is, translations are meant for those who cannot read the Telugu originals. For instance, in the sixties, the translations of Hunchback of Notre Dame [ghantaaraavam] by Surampudi Sitaram, and A Tale of Two Cities [rendu mahanagaraalu] by Tenneti Suri were received by Telugu readers with remarkable

enthusiasm because of the beauty in the Telugu versions regardless of the native flavor in the originals. I am sure that a vast majority of the readers did not read the originals in French and English and did not care for what they might be missing.

In addition to the foreign readers, in recent times, there are two more groups of readers, who are enjoying the translations in English. First group consists of the educated Telugu people who have gotten used to using English as their first language, almost, and thus enjoying reading Telugu stories in English. The second group is the current day Telugu youth who have attended English medium schools and thus are unable to read the Telugu script. They, being knowledgeable in Telugu culture, are different from the foreign readers though. Nonetheless, they all enjoy the translations in English with the same fervor.

For the purpose of this article, the target audience is assumed to be unfamiliar with the Telugu language and culture.

### **Language: Pedantic versus Colloquial**

In modern Telugu fiction, in literature the language started out as the language used by the polite society, known as *sishtajana vyaavahaarikam*, which is translatable fairly well. Basically, it is the language standardized and adopted by magazines and the other media. The underlying philosophy is stories written in *sishtajana vyaavahaarikam* would reach a wide range of readers across the state. In English, this is comparable to the British English I had learned at Andhra University. Of course, still there are variations such as spelling between British and American English.

Colloquial style, on the other hand, consists of several dialects. They vary based on region, social groups, and even sophistication of the readers. To be honest, some of the dialects are beyond my comprehension despite my stay in those regions for considerable amount of time. In that sense, stories written in regional dialects and the dialects of rural communities pose bigger problems for me.

In America, the colloquial forms include words spelled as spoken, contractions and ellipses. For example “I ain’t cummin’” for “I am not coming”, “Whaddyado” for “What do you do”, “bro” for brother, “ADD” for “attention deficit disorder” and so on. However, this implies understanding a completely new language, which is beyond my comprehension. For that reason, I have decided to stay with the language of the polite society and paraphrase it, where occasion called for it.

However, I have attempted to bring about some distinction between the pedantic and the colloquial styles in my translations. For instance, one may notice the difference in the translations between the two stories, “The Soul wills it” (Satyanarayana. *jeevudi ishtam*) and “Middle Class Complex” (Venkataramana. *janataa express*). I used the pedantic style in the former and the colloquial style in the latter. Pavani Sastry on behalf of his father, late Viswanatha Satyanarayana, and Venkataramana expressed their satisfaction with my translations. Venkataramana wrote to me, “People say my stories are hard to translate but you have done good job.” (Personal correspondence with the author.). I was able to do justice to his

story, “Middle Class Complex” mainly because there was a story to tell, and the humor in the story emanated from the incidents universal in nature. On the other hand, another story by the same author, “Radha’s debt” [Radhamma baki] was hard to translate since it contained humor and phraseology that would go beyond the pale of my language skills. That being the case, I chose to write an analytical article, explaining the humor in the story, instead of translating it. I believe I have succeeded in conveying a taste of the humor prevalent in our society to the non-native speakers through my review.

### **Native flavor**

As mentioned earlier, the native flavor is a big problem in translations, possibly, even within the context of Indian languages. For instance a phrase like *katha Kancikee, manam intikee*, [Literally, the story moved on to the town of Kanjeepuram and we to our homes] may have similar phrases in other languages possibly with the name of a different town in their area. In such instances, the translator would have to decide whether he would keep the proper noun, Kanjeepuram, or choose the equivalent phrase in the target language. Personally, I would prefer the Telugu phrase and provide an explanation.

Second aspect of the native flavor is the sonorous quality of Telugu. The vowel-ending feature and alliterations contribute to the musical nature of our language. One has to be a poet to bring about that effect. Although I am not a poet, I will try my best to achieve that effect. I will remind myself that I was translating a story, not poetry. Stories by Rachakonda Viswanatha Sastry fall under this category. In his stories, there is a story to tell and poetry to experience the beauty of the language, which is a major component in his success as a storyteller.

On rare occasions, I feel a story untranslatable because of its musical quality. Had I chosen such a story for a different reason, I would elaborate on the native flavor in the editorial. If the entire story is poetic in nature, and I am trying to translate it, I will alert the readers at the beginning itself of what they might be missing in the translation along with the high watermarks in the story. Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry’s stories are known for his command of diction. The traditional values, especially the manner in which he deals with the institution of prostitution, is not exactly my cup of tea yet his presentation is captivating.

### **Structure**

Occasionally, I would select a story specifically for its historical significance and the details it provides about lives of the rural communities. One such story is “yajnam” (Rama Rao). This critically acclaimed and highly controversial story has been translated by more than one translator, I believe. I have not seen the other translations but I am positive that there are significant differences between my translation and the other translations. In this story, apart from the author’s use of Srikakulam dialect and the farming community, there is a passage where the protagonist, Appalramudu, delivers a speech, which runs to about four pages. Additionally, the speech is interspersed with episodes from the past. That requires the reader to move back and forth in time, and grasp the speech at two levels—the past and the present. That puts a huge burden on the mind of a reader unfamiliar with our culture; it would be frustrating. Therefore, I have made some structural changes in my translation with the author’s express permission.



One more factor to remember is we have not outgrown the use of some of the elements of narrative technique common in oral tradition. Telling a story to a live audience has its advantages and is hard to resist. Besides, Telugu readers have no problem with the elements of oral tradition such as switching between the past and the present and digressions in a narrative. Nevertheless, it is a problem for readers from other cultures.

In a heartrending story of a working-class woman, “A Desperate Cry” (Ranganayakamma. aarthanadam.), the author, includes an episode containing a long humorous dialogue between a grandmother and her grandchildren. The episode has no relevance to the original story and the language she used is not easy to translate because of the various forms of address and trivial phraseology. It is a structural flaw in the story. Further discussion of this episode is given under Humor.

### **Dhvani [suggestion] and vakrokti [indirect communication] in translations**

Dhvani [suggestion] and vakrokti [indirect communication] are common in literatures but problematic in crosscultural translation. While the concept is known in all literatures, it is not easy to comprehend the full meaning in the stories from other cultures. It makes the reader constantly worry that he, being unaware of the nuance, might be missing something. That would be an additional burden on the reader, and subsequently discouraging to continue to read the story. In such instances also, I would add a brief note. For the same reason, long conversations involving too many phrases like “you know what I mean” are best avoided.

### **Grammar: Tense**

In Telugu, we switch tenses freely. In English the tense needs to agree with the actual sequence of events within a given time frame. If the story is told in the past tense, any references to the previous incidents should be told in the past perfect. In some of our stories, we find long narrations of previous incidents, which require past perfect forms. The use of “had” in each sentence in a long passage is grammatically correct yet disruptive to the flow, especially if the previous incident runs to two or three pages. Added to the confusion is when the previous incident has references to another incident further back in time. Some of my friends suggested indenting or changing the font size in order to mark the change in tense visible in long passages.

Another suggestion is to add opening and closing lines at the beginning and the end of the long narration of the past. The additional lines help the reader to move back and forth in time along with the story. In shorter sentences, I would avoid the use of past perfect tense sometimes. For instance, a sentence like “He had four children” seems to mean he “had children in the past but not now”. After consulting my American friends, I have learned one way to circumvent the problem is to rearrange the sentences. I could say, “His sons were helping him in chores” or something similar to that effect, based on the context. Implicitly, the readers would know that he had children at the time of narration.

### **Non-finite verb forms**

A linguistic peculiarity in Telugu is the use of nonfinite verbs [asamaapaka kriya]. In English, it would be a series of short complete sentences or used in conjunction with a gerund, the -ing ending. A phrase like cheppi vacchaanu translates as either “I said and came”, or, “After telling, I came”. In either case, the actual verb for cheppu [to say] fails to convey the ease of diction, which the Telugu phrase carries. This example is the simplest in this type of construction. There are other instances where a series of nonfinite verbs may be used to build tempo. Native speakers appreciate the escalating tension as they read the sentence. In translation, we can hardly accomplish that pace with the use of gerunds or several short sentences.

The longest sentence I have come across is the first paragraph in “Meaningless Union” (Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma. anavasara dampatyam). The very first sentence runs to fourteen lines and contains twenty-three nonfinite verbs, not to mention a few verbal adjectives! In my translation, I broke them into shorter sentences. Also, of necessity, I moved the last part of the fourteen-line sentence to the beginning. This is necessitated by the differences in the sentence structures in the two languages—Telugu and English.

## **Pronouns**

The abundance of pronouns in Telugu language vouches for its richness. We have six forms for the third person singular, male, vaadu, atanu, aayana, veedu, ithanu, eeyana—all translate into one word “he” in English. In addition, we have a gender-free pronoun, tanu, which acts like a third person singular, which will be discussed later.

Consider the following sentence for translation and note the resulting confusion in translation. Aayana vaadini kaafee tecci ataniki immannaaru. Vaadu kaafee tecci ataniki iccaadu. The translation could be, “He told him to bring coffee for him. He brought it and gave it to him.” In this case, once again, it would be immensely helpful to the reader if the translator makes clear who is who, and who is doing what.

The use of the pronoun “those” for “they” may be grammatically correct yet looks odd at the end of a sentence. Translation for annaaru vaallu as “said those” does not look right to me, at least. I would prefer using “those” as an adjective and “they” as a proper noun. Thus, my translation would be “they said” or “said those [farmers]” or whoever the people happened to be in the story.

The second person, singular and plural pronouns, meeru and nuvvu translate into English as the same word, “you”. There is no distinction between formal and informal, or singular and plural. In this case, the translation may lose the cultural nuance.

One good example is a conversation between a husband and wife. In Andhra Pradesh, the husband-wife relationship is complex. The use of second person singular pronouns, nuvvu and meeru used by husband and wife calls for attention. I am aware that the usage varies depending on the region, caste, economic status and, in modern times, sophistication. Despite these variations, customarily, it is considered normal for husband to address wife as nuvvu and wife to address husband as meeru. This usage presupposes a shade of hierarchy in a familial context. Additionally, the verb endings change, which again are missed in the translation. In some stories,

the author may be making this distinction to drive home a point. In the story, “Poet’s Wife” (Krishnakumari. kavi gaari bharya), the narrator comments that the poet’s wife referred to her husband as meeru or nuvvu depending on what she thought of him—as husband or uncle’s son—at a given moment. In such cases, a brief note is needed invariably.

Two vocative forms require special attention for the same reason. In an informal setting, people of the same age group use the vocative forms, orei and osei, males and females respectively among themselves. The closest form in English would be “hey”. Probably, the use of “hey” is acceptable in a casual conversation but not when the author makes a point of it specifically. In the story, “Rite of Sacrifice”, the narrator comments that the village head, Sriramulu Naidu addresses the poor farmer, Appalramudu, as emoi but never as orei (Rama Rao. Yajnam). Native speakers would know that emoi is informal and respectful and orei is demeaning in this particular context. By “in this context”, I mean there are other instances when orei will not be considered offensive as in the case of men of the same age group.

I have also noticed that long Indian names such as Sitaramudu and Sriramulu Naidu (Rama Rao. “yajnam”) will be confusing to the non-native speakers. Several forms of the same name like Erri, Errakka, and Erramma are also prone to be mistaken for the names of three people.

### **Proper nouns based on physical attributes**

In “Choices”. (Chaganti Somayajulu. Empu), the author used physical attributes as personal names—Kunti for a crippled man and Guddi for a blind man. Technically, these terms are not different from names like Visalakshi, meaning a woman with large eyes or Syamasundar for a man with dark skin. The latter examples however are not considered offensive. On the other hand, the terms referring to physical limitations are derogatory and often accepted only by the people who are not in a position to protest. Perhaps, that is one of the messages the author intended to convey. However, the literal translations of these terms as “crippled” and “blind” would not be appropriate in my opinion. A non-heritage speaker would interpret them as insensitive. I am not saying they are not insensitive. That is not the cultural trait I would want to convey. I would rather keep the original terminology as is and explain them in a footnote.

### **Professional terminology as Proper Nouns**

Another trait in our culture is to use professional terminology as personal names. For example, Beenadevi used daactaru garu and jadgee garu in her story, “A Piece of Ribbon” [ribbanu mukka”]. My dilemma was whether to treat them as English words and follow the English spelling or treat them as given names and follow the spellings according to our Telugu custom. If I were to consider the words as professional titles, I should spell them as doctor garu and judge garu. Also, I would have to use the articles ‘a’ or ‘the’ appropriately. Then I would be failing to convey to the reader an important cultural trait, which is, forging close friendship with the professionals we come across in our lives and using the terms as personal names regardless of their professional status. As a translator, I think it is important for me to create an environment in the translation so the foreign reader would understand all these implications.

In this regard, I have consulted several Americans, both friends and strangers. Once again, there is no consensus since the concept is foreign to them. I have decided to treat them as personal names, spell them per our custom, and explain it in a footnote or in the editorial.

### **Relational terminologies as Proper Nouns**

Relevant to our discussion are the forms of address prevalent in our society. We have different terms for the children of brothers or sisters (baava, maridi, vadina, maradalu) as opposed to the children of two sisters or two brothers. Terms like *atta garu*, *tammudu*, and *akkayya* tell immensely about our culture. I also would like to see these terms find their way into English across the world the same way *karma* and *masala* are incorporated into English. Maybe I am being naïve; maybe I am being ambitious, but certainly, I would like to work towards that end!

In America, all these relational terms, including persons from different generations, are rolled up into a single term, “cousin”. If I translate *chinnakka* and *peddakka*, as “little big sister” and “big big sister”, it does not make sense and is certain to hurt the flow. Further, in a dialogue, it is hard to use them as vocative forms; it would be jarring. It is also hard to let the reader understand that sometimes, the same term such as *peddakka* may be used by others even when there is no relationship between the two. Another contradiction is the standard MLA requirement that all foreign words should be italicized.

For instance, in the story, “My sister: A Classy Lady [Tulasi. hundaa], *akkayya* is known only as *akkayya*. In all, I have been treating the relational terminology as personal names, unless the story calls for a different interpretation. Additionally, I would suggest referring to the glossary for further explanation. Incidentally, I might add, that the glossary on my site is the most frequently accessed file yet!

A unique pronoun in Telugu language is *tanu*, which is technically third person singular pronoun. When the author uses *tanu* as narrator, the entire story is told from the point of view of that character as if it is a first person singular pronoun. Unlike the third person pronouns, *tanu* is not gender-specific. Sometimes, but not always, it is possible to deduce the gender by the verb-endings in a given sentence. It is a long ride for the reader before he can figure it out on his own.

Writers may occasionally use this term loosely, giving rise to some confusion. In the story, “He is I” [Ramakrishna Sastry. soham], the narrator switches between “I” and “*tanu*” rather erratically. This form of narrative, distinctive in oral tradition, is easily understood by native speakers but confusing to the readers from other cultures. Therefore, I take it upon myself to be consistent even when it meant a departure from the original text.

### **Phrases and Idioms**

We may classify Telugu phrases into three categories: 1. Phrases that allow straight translation; 2. Phrases and idioms, which may be translated with some effort; and, 3. Phrases and idioms, which require considerable effort to make them comprehensible to the foreign audience. In the latter two instances, the question is to what degree we can make the necessary changes in the original. How do we find a meaningful phrase or sentence, which will capture the reader’s

imagination and, at the same time, convey the cultural nuance? Second question is whether we should use the English equivalents wherever available or translate the Telugu phrases to highlight the Telugu nuance and provide the English equivalent in a footnote.

### **Phrases, which allow straight translation**

There are not many but a few like *pustakappurugu*, which translates as bookworm easily. The phrase *chevini vesukonakapovu* is comparable to “turning a deaf ear”. On the other hand, a phrase like *mannu tinna paamu* has no equivalent in English to my knowledge. However, it is not hard to coin a new phrase “a snake snacked on dirt”, working on the alliteration to give it a proverbial sense. There is no ambiguity in these translations. One more note on this subject. When I first started my website, *thulika.net*, I did not provide the Telugu equivalents for these translations. Then, a young Telugu reader, who attended English medium school, suggested that I give the Telugu proverbs in a footnote so readers like her would be able to improve their Telugu language skills as well. That substantiates my claim that providing additional information does not hurt.

### **Phrases, which require some effort to make them comprehensible in translation**

I am not enunciating a theory but giving what has been my practice and I will explain why. Some phrases may not be translatable while others leave some room to be creative. For instance, the phrase, *Kondaveeti chentaadu* in “A Triangle” [*Veerraju. trikonam*] is one such phrase. I translated it as *Kondaveeti rope*. The phrase refers to the topographical significance of the village *Kondaveedu* in Guntur district, where water is scarce and the wells are dreadfully deep. For the villagers of *Kondaveedu*, drawing water from those wells is a long and laborious task. Implicitly, a task compared to *kondaveeti rope* is long and laborious. I thought, by translating the translatable part, *chentaadu* as jute rope, a foreign reader would have a better motivation to learn more about the implicit meaning. Additionally, the name of the village *Kondaveedu*, is slightly different from the oblique form, *Kondaveeti*, (possessive case) and that is another problematic area for a foreign reader. If I were to leave the entire phrase as *Kondaveeti chaantaadu*, the reader is sure to miss the entire connotation.

### **Untranslatable Phrases**

We have phrases and idioms that are almost untranslatable. Just translating them alone would not suffice to communicate the spirit of the original to the readers. Two languages of two diametrically opposite cultures do not lend themselves to accurate translation one hundred percent. Culture-specific phrases and idioms belong in this category.

Let us take a culture-specific phrase like *lempalesukonu* in “A Story of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law (*Bhanumati. Attaakodaleeyam*). No matter how we translate it, it would be impossible for a foreign reader to visualize the actual scenario. I translated it as “She tapped on her cheeks lightly and reverently.” One young writer wrote to me why I could not translate it as “she slapped her cheeks”. My explanation is the phrase *lempakaaya iccu* in Telugu means slapping another person and in anger. On the other hand, *lempalesukonu* is an act by which a person lightly taps on his/her own cheeks, and in order to express his/her remorse. It refers to a

socio-religious, cultural practice and apologetic in spirit. For a reader who is not familiar with this practice, “slapping” invokes a completely different imagery in his mind. This is not one of the instances I would leave to the reader to understand from the context.

### **Proverbs, which have corresponding proverbs in the target language**

Proverbs or adages are time-honored, time-tested facts. They are the props that come in handy for a writer when the language fails or is inadequate to express himself. Proverbs often contain a rhyme or alliteration either to capture one’s attention or as a mnemonic device. This is one aspect the translator must remember while translating the proverbs. When I translate, I try to bring about similar effect in English. That explains some of the digressions from the original in my translations of Telugu proverbs. The following examples illustrate my point.

My translation for the proverb mundu nuyyi, venaka goyyi is “a well in front and a trench behind”. In English, the corresponding proverb is, “between a rock and a hard place”. Nevertheless, I would prefer to give a translation of the original Telugu phrase instead of using the English proverb. My aim is to highlight the commonalities in different cultures and perhaps the topography.

### **Culture-specific Proverbs, which have no equivalents in the target language.**

Some proverbs, which are culture-specific in terms of beliefs and lifestyles, are equally open to more than one interpretation.

I translated kadupu cincukunte kaallameeda padutundi as “You tear your guts and they fall on your feet”. In the Telugu sentence, the subject is not stated explicitly but the verb cinchukonu is a reflexive, meaning one doing something to oneself. I supplied ‘you’ in the conditional clause and ‘they’ [the guts] in the principal clause. The translation is fairly literal and thus imparts the implied meaning—“when you hurt your children, in turn, it hurts you”.

Another angle in these proverbs is lack of a subject or subject without a given name. In such cases, it is necessary to improvise a subject for the purpose of clarification. English language will not permit sentences without subject as illustrated above. The translator needs to pick the correct subject based on the context.

Another proverb I translated is gati leni manushulu taguvukedite matileni peddalu teerchevaaraa ani as “like hapless men seeking justice from brainless men”. Here again, I tried to coin a new adage based on the original text loosely. The correct translation would be “When people without means went [to the court] for justice, are the persons without brains going to decide?”. The sentence is too long, and additionally requires another word, the place where they went to. A short crisp sentence would make a better impression on the readers, I thought.

Let us examine the proverbs or phrases, which are not translatable. For example, a phrase like adugulaku madugulottadam carries deeper cultural nuance. I think the word madugulu refers to madatalu (folded clothes). I understand the phrase refers to spreading a sheet for the guest of honor to walk on. In everyday usage, it has come to mean something similar to the red carpet

treatment. However, I would prefer coining a new phrase as opposed to using the English phrase “red carpet treatment”, in order to emphasize the slight differences in the two cultures.

### **Distinctive and Culture-specific Phraseology**

Culture-specific phraseology requires more than the use of a dictionary to translate. For instance, *mancimaata chesuku vaccu* is an archaic phrase referring to an old custom. In the old days, poor brahmin women used to run what is known as *poota kuulla illu*, where the woman serves food for money in an informal setting. The phrase, *mancimaata chesuku vaccu* has come to mean discussing the food arrangements with a homeowner. Another example is *vaaraalu chesukonu*, which also refers to an erstwhile custom. It is also food arrangements young Brahmin boys would make with few families (seven families for seven days of the week, to be specific) while they pursued their education. Whenever I come across phrases like these, I would like to keep them in the story and explain in a footnote. That is important for the story to keep its cultural nuance.

Other concepts peculiar to our culture are *engili*, *antu*, *madi*, and *dishti*. The corresponding English words, which have gained some currency, are saliva pollution [*engili*], touch pollution [*antu*], quarantine-like condition [*madi*], and evil eye [*dishti*]. Hopefully, one day these Telugu words will be incorporated into the English language. The word *karma* has gained currency in America to mean divine ordinance. In Telugu, it has several shades of meaning. Based on the context, I may use the term *karma* or translate it into English. That helps the reader to move forward without wasting too much time guessing what the meaning might be.

I am aware that some writers and some readers feel that these distinctions overburden the reader or undercut his/her imagination. I would rather prefer to think that these concepts are important in setting apart the two cultures. It helps the readers to understand how these concepts play out in the source culture.

I translated “*sodi manishi*” (Vasa Prabhavati) as village psychic with some hesitation. I am aware that telling *sodi* is not the same as predicting future by a psychic. My point is the *sodi* practice is culture-specific. There are other terms like fortuneteller, soothsayer, occultist, medium, and spiritualist. None of them exactly means the same as *sodi manishi*. When two cultures do not have the same practice, vocation, or lifestyle, we need to choose a term in the target language based on comparable practices. A psychic invokes spirits to predict future events; the *sodi* woman invokes goddesses for the same purpose. The spirits and the goddesses may not be the same but both are unverifiable sources. In that sense, I thought *sodi* woman would be comparable to a psychic or fortuneteller. Frankly, this is one of the instances where there would always be a question, no matter what word I had chosen. I chose psychic since it rolled easier on my tongue. Nevertheless, I was aware that the term did not import the complete cultural nuance and therefore I provided further explanation of the *sodi* tradition in the glossary at the end of the book.

### **Culture-specific Humor**

Unquestionably, humor is hard to translate, since it is deep-rooted in culture. Bhanumati narrates an incident in “attaa kodaleeyam”, in which she describes her mother-in-law’s *madi*, a temporary, quarantine-like condition one creates for oneself. And her husband makes fun of the smelly pickles his mother was eating. In both the cases, from a westerner’s standpoint, the son and the daughter-in-law were not being polite to the older woman. Thus translating the paragraph as is without paraphrasing is not sufficient to convey the humor in the story.

In the same passage, the daughter-in-law also speaks facetiously about her mother-in-law sitting on the floor to eat and facing the wall. The narrator’s reference to the Lord Narasimha in this context once again is hilarious for those who are familiar with the mythological character. For those who are not familiar with the story of Narasimha, an explanation is necessary.

In “A Desperate Cry” (Ranganayakamma. aartanaadam), there is an episode in which the grandchildren would visit their grandmother, after they were informed that she was dying. As it turned out, she was not ready to die yet and the grandchildren seized the occasion to tease her. The episode has no relevance to the story, except the storyline calls for the female protagonist’s absence from home for an extended period of time.

In a personal letter addressed to me, the author agreed that the episode was irrelevant and gave me her permission to delete it at my discretion (Ranganayakamma. Personal Correspondence). I however chose to keep it in order to drive home a point—the free exchange of almost irreverent words between adults and children in a family. Grandchildren asking the grandmother whether she would really want to die at all, or where she kept all her money, what she was going to do with it, and the tone of the conversation—all would be considered rude at one level and entertaining at another level. This is in direct contradiction of the custom of showing respect to the elders by the young people. Nevertheless, it is normal in some families and the story highlights that point. I discussed this topic in greater detail in my book, *Telugu Women Writers, 1950-1975* (Nidadavolu.).

### **English words in Telugu stories:**

Various writers use English words in Telugu stories to serve different purposes. If the English words are used simply as a reproduction of current colloquial style, probably, the translator may take them as they are and incorporate them without thinking twice. However, if it is part of the author’s narrative technique as in the case of Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry, they need to be interpreted appropriately. It is necessary to examine if the author is using the English terminology to shift gears in the flow of the narrative or to invoke ridicule of an existing practice. Viswanatha Sastry uses this technique superbly. Also, if the author is simply reproducing the English words from the original, the translator needs to see if the actual words used in India are comprehensible to the global audience. For instance, “far relative” for “distant relative”, “long hand shirt” for “long sleeve shirt” and “time pass” for “passing time” are some examples, which do not go very well in a translation for global audience

Working with the Authors



In general, my practice is to translate first line by line, then go over the translation, and make the necessary changes for smooth reading. In the process, I may change the order of the sentences, add a word or two in some places, and even move around sentences to make it readable. Then I send it to the author, with a note about the changes I have made. The authors suggest one or two changes. I would accept their suggestions, if appropriate. That has been my practice for the past seven and a half years.

So far, there has been only one instance, where the author kept suggesting changes, and out of frustration, I decided to drop the idea of working with that writer. In short, working with writers has not been a problem for me. The only problem is locating the writers or copyright holders for permissions.

## **Conclusion**

To sum up, the translator needs to remember who the target audiences are. Even as we tell children's stories in a language intelligible to the children, we, the translators, have a moral obligation to honor the language behavior of the target audience. Leaving it to the readers to deduce the meaning from the context may work fine when the readers are from within the same culture. As stated at the outset, an important goal of the translations is to serve as an educational experience for the readers from other cultures. In that sense, we are obligated to focus on the cultural nuance. The reader may still choose to skip the explanations. In my experience, a translator is a writer also. He will draw on the diction at his command and produce a translation, while striving to make it appealing to the target audience. In that attempt, he may lose some of the native flavor of the original yet he will succeed only if he has the freedom to be creative and present the story in a language he is comfortable with. If the author disagrees, there is no meeting of the minds and there is no translation. He just moves on to the next translation.

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## ARTICLES

### STRUCTURE IN [*silpam*] IN TELUGU STORY

Stories evolve in a given culture, based on their lifestyles, and from their environment. Readers and critics need to analyze a story from that perspective. In practice, however, there seems to be two angles. Some critics seem to apply modern criteria to assess a work of fiction written long time back. On the otherhand, other critics believe that we will not have new insights into the literature of previous centuries if we had not applied new ways of reading a text of the past. Then the question is what is the plausible way to appreciate the fiction of the past?

Kondaveeti Satyavati, in her article on Bhandaru Acchamamba, stated that Acchamamba Telugu critics dismissed Acchamamba's story, *dhanatrayodasi*, as "failed to meet the criteria for short fiction, all the story possessed all the characteristics of a good story."

In an attempt to compare Acchamamba's story to another story by a contemporary writer, I started searching and stumbled on an anthology, *alasina gundelu* [Tired hearts] by Rachamalla Ramachandra Reddy. In the anthology, Ramachandra Reddy included a 43-page essay on the structure in fiction, "*kathanika, daani silpamu*" [Short story and its structure]. Let me quote some of his arguments relevant to my discussion from the aforesaid essay.

Ramachandra Reddy's views on short story are as follows:

I wrote these stories [in the aforesaid anthology] with a hope that they would imprint a strong sense of emotion on the readers' hearts. ... In fact, the entire literature is oriented towards hearts. There is no literature without feeling. That feeling however must not turn into a melodrama.

One popular notion is that a story must have a 'point'. "I am not sure if there is equivalent term in Telugu for the word 'point'. For the present, I would call it *lakshyam*. A story must convey a truth, a moral, a principle, or a hypothesis. ...

In the previous century, when the story was born, its point was either a truth or a moral. That means it was only a concept in the mind of the writer.

Then there is the question, What about feeling? ... The reader continues to experience the emotions of the characters while reading a story. Then the question we must ask is whether a story can be written to either invoke a feeling or convey a message exclusively?"

Ramachandra Reddy discussed the topic at length quoting a few European writers like O'Henry and Katherine Mansfield and then posed the question how it was relevant to his discussion on hand. He stated that currently the short story in Telugu has gotten entangled in the steel arms of the commercial magazines, lost its original form, and been reduced to a skeleton. He further added:

Because a story will inevitably contain a "feeling" in some form or other, and because nobody is writing at Katherine Mansfield's level now, let us limit our discussion to the point in a story. ...

A short story must have only one point, and, characters and incidents should contribute toward that end, the point.

From that perspective, Ramachandra Reddy attempted to write a story as an experiment in structure, an indispensable characteristic to achieve the point in the story. The author observed that most people in the world live a tedious, uneventful life, and most of them are women, understandably. Therefore, he decided to depict the life of one such woman.

The story, *mana jeevita kathalu* [Stories of Our Lives], opens with the statement, “I may search her entire life and still find not a single incident worth writing about. How can I write a story without anything special in her life or lifestyle?” That *is* the problem for structure, says the author.

Mr. Ramachandra Reddy took it as a challenge since he had never come across a story without point, which makes it impossible to make the story structurally strong. The closest he could think of was “Madame Bovary” by Gustave Flaubert, in which Emma, the main character, lived a droning life. She was not without emotions. In fact, she had a fantasy in her mind, which clashed with her surroundings outside, leading to her mental breakdown. Her husband on the other hand was willing to take life as it came and so he had no problem. There was no conflict in his life. He was a flat character.

Ramachandra Reddy decided to create a character similar to the husband in “Madame Bovary” in *peddamma*, the main character in “the Stories of Our Lives.” Since there was no conceivable tension or conflict in peddamma’s life, the author created two more characters, a couple living next door. He based his story on the responses of the couple to the dull life of peddamma. Readers are expected to respond to the husband/writer/narrator’s anxiety to find a thrilling incident in the old woman’s life and the wife’s two-fold anxiety. She attempts to squeeze out a story from peddamma for the sake of her husband, and in the process, builds a bond with the old woman rather unwittingly. In the end, the wife sees a story in the life of peddamma but not the husband. Is that a comment on the way men and women think and respond to a fellow human: Or, is it supposed to be the way a writer and a non-writer would respond?

In his analysis of structure, we see three perceptions—that of Ramachandra Reddy the writer, Ramachandra Reddy the critic, and the narrator in the story. The author and the critic explain the why, how and the result of writing a story without plot. The narrator within the story lives it. There is however some overlap, I think between the writer and the narrator.

The author says, “Peddamma has a husband, children, and the usual events such as children’s weddings, and the little tribulations in life, the same as everybody else ... That is a common denominator for almost all people. Other than that, there are no events, nothing unusual, in her life. She has not experienced intense pleasures or unbearable hardships. She believes that life is the same for everybody. Her understanding of life is so narrow.”

As I was reading this analysis, I had to stop at the last line. Suddenly it felt like the critic became the narrator in calling the woman’s understanding of the world into question. The narrator in the story had the same impression from peddamma’s life. However, his wife could relate to peddamma’s account of her life. That became obvious when the wife asked her husband, “Did you hear peddamma’s story?” There *is* a story for her.

Ramachandra Reddy the writer decided to write a story about the way people around her would respond to peddamma’s unflustered life in the absence of passion in her own life. “Others may

react to her in any number of ways. Some may be sympathetic to her. Others may resent her apathy, or even be aggravated by it and become philosophical. If I could depict all these responses effectively, it could turn into a good story,” said Ramachandra Reddy.

There was also a comment about the names in the story. In response to the comment by another critic, the author said, “Somebody commented that I did not give a name to the old woman to imply that she is a very ordinary person, insignificant in a way. I did not think so. In fact, I did not give names to the other two characters in the story either. I agree that names do carry weight in stories but I did not find the need to do so in this story.”

I would like to add a note on this aspect in our stories. In Telugu culture, we often address people using relational terminology such as *peddamma* (granny), *akka* (older sister), *atta* (aunt) even when we are not related by blood. I see the term *peddamma* as a proper name in that context. Other minor characters in the story such as son and daughter are also not given names.

Acchamamba’s story, “*strividya*” [Women’s education] is comparable to the above story in some ways; both the stories deal with no major heartbreaking issues or earthshaking resolutions. In Acchamamba’s story, the point is women’s education, a mode of communication between husband and wife, while the husband was held as political prisoner. The story illustrates the main problem, which is the wife’s lack of reading and writing skills, and includes an elaborate discussion of the benefits of women’s education.

In both the stories, the incidents leading to the end are not played out or described in detail, which is common in our narrative technique. They are verbalized in brief statements. In “Women’s Education,” the wife says she would have her younger brother read and write the letters on her behalf. In “The Stories of Our Lives,” *peddamma* says she was married, her son and daughter were married and so on. Each incident was rounded up in one-liners or a few lines at best.

I thought it would be interesting to study the two stories written in juxtaposition, using the criteria, Mr. Ramachandra Reddy had identified.

The story, “Hard to Believe” brings up yet another question regarding the element of reality in fiction. Can a reader suspend his disbelief in the illusory figment temporarily and enjoy a good story just for its point of view? Is it possible to sift truth from fiction and apply one’s mind to the underlying argument in the story? I liked this story for its narrative technique. While the author addresses a potent issue, a social malignancy, the technique she adopted to tell the story raises questions in regard to its authenticity. Or does it?

Souris’ story, “A **Memory**” maybe construed as one more romance fiction or a brief peek into a given moment in human psyche based on how we look at it. Some readers may perceive this story as an illustration of a woman’s heartbreak. I am inclined to see it as a stop, a turning point, in one’s lifespan. The key point is, or so it seems, when she asks, “When did all this—the son-in-law, the daughter, and the children—happen?” It would appear that she blocked out, knowingly or unknowingly a considerable portion of her life between the *kamini* flowers and the grown up children. Strange as it may sound, I have known of male retirees ask the same question after a long period of their public life, “Where are the little children?” The point is we all get carried away by one preoccupation in our lives (the woman in the story enjoyed her husband’s wealth and social status for the time being) and then return to what captured our hearts in our adolescent years.

Souris' father, Gudipati Venkata Chalam, spent major part of his life on his radical writings, advocating sexual freedom for women and later settled down in Arunachalam for peace. I could envisage him asking himself the same question, "What happened in the past several years?"

## ELEMENTS OF ORAL TRADITION IN TELUGU FICTION

My friends and readers of my site, [thulika.net](http://thulika.net), often ask me why I am so bent on choosing stories from the past four or five decades as opposed to the contemporary fiction. I think the most valid reason is obvious from the selections discussed here.

Basically, I started this site to introduce Telugu fiction and culture to the readers from other cultures. My selections of stories for translation are based on this criterion. However, when we translate our stories for global audience, we need to explain the characteristics peculiar to our culture. Some of our stories written in modern times contain elements which defy the west criteria of a good story and yet accepted by Telugu readers. The only way we can explain them is by making allowance as features of oral tradition.

Traditionally, in the past, poets were considered despots (nirankuso kavayah). They were free to write whatever they felt like writing and in a form and language they deemed fit. They also allowed the readers the same freedom. They provided a venue to interpret, to build on, and, even to create a new story. In other words, the authors aimed to provoke the readers into thinking in their own way.

In the oral narrative, the narrator addresses a live audience. Usually, they all gather at a specific place, away from other distractions of everyday cares and chores, and are presumably in a receptive mood. The narrator will have the opportunity to use visual tools such as gestures, and draw on local and immediate occurrences in the community for props. In print, most of these details need to be replaced by other modes of illumination.

Strange as it may sound, most of the writers have not left the oral tradition behind completely. In this essay, I attempted to highlight some of the elements of the oral tradition that have crept possibly inadvertently into the stories written in modern times.

The technique of storytelling is peculiar to the writer. No two persons talk alike and no two writers tell the same story in the same words. That is the reason we have so many stories on the same topic. Each writer presents a new perspective and contributes to the commonality of understanding. And, possibly, no two readers appreciate the same story and grasp the same message from a given story.

In Andhra Pradesh, the print became a medium for disseminating fiction just about a century ago. Custom dies hard in any walk of life and storytelling is no exception. While numerous experiments are introduced in rendering fiction in print, some traits of the traditional narrative style are lingering on.

The freedom for expression for each writer to write in his or her own style continued well into the fifties and the sixties. In recent times, however, many Telugu writers are anxious to adapt to the western mode of thinking and fit into a formula—a specific type of hero, a particular kind of problem, and almost predictable ending. Unlike in the past, now the publishers and the editors of weekly and monthly magazines are dictating the terms, and even modifying the text submitted for publication.

Evaluating Telugu stories using western critiquing tools started probably in the latter half of the twentieth century in Andhra Pradesh. It has become a norm for Telugu critics to quote western fiction writers as benchmarks for good stories. Workshops and seminars are being held to teach story-writing technique. In the process, the elements peculiar to Telugu fiction are being ignored.

In “The Soul Wills It” (Satyanarayana. Jeevudi ishtam), the story illustrates man and woman not as two entities but one, and, the pain suffered by the woman as suffered by man through the body of the woman. In terms of technique, the author used several forms. It started out with a description of the location and the characters. And then, in some parts, it was presented in the form of direct report, and, in one place, a dialogue was also introduced as in a play. Is this technique acceptable in modern stories? I am not sure. As I said at the outset, the author has the freedom to present his story in a manner that is befitting to his mode of thinking. Will that confuse the reader? I guess it does unless the reader takes the trouble to transpose himself into the story.

The story, “A Piece of Ribbon” (Beenadevi) is a classic example of carrying some of the elements of oral tradition.

The story opens with a small group of friends gathered on the lawn of a rich doctor to spend a leisurely evening. The main theme to be understood from the title is that it is a story of a poor girl desperately longing for a piece of ribbon. After a few minutes of casual chitchat and lighthearted exchange of jokes, the main topic is introduced with “Oh that reminds me ...”, which is comparable to the preamble in a harikatha [Stories told by professional singers]. The casualness with which the main story opened belies the grimness or gravity of the core theme and the poor girl aching for a piece of ribbon for her hair. The tribulations of the doctor at the turn of events—first, his satisfaction of being the benefactor, later his failure to deliver, his insatiable thirst for revenge and, at the end, the punishment he had been handed down for his mindless act are all delineated in great detail.

If we apply the western criteria to this story, we can see it lacks unity and tightness. Halfway through, the story turns into the problems and tribulations the doctor had suffered; it is not about the little girl and her disappointments or hardships anymore. On the other hand, judged by the stamp of approval by the Telugu readers on this story, we have to assume that the Telugu readers and critics accepted this flaw [?] and appreciated the story as much for its traditional elements as for the core message as evinced in the title. That is also evident from the award (Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry award) the story has received in 1999. Strangely, the award came 34 years after its original publication in 1965.

Readers familiar with our oral tradition are accustomed to ignoring embellishments and going straight to the core idea. For majority of Telugu readers, this is a story of a poor girl who could not afford a piece of ribbon. To me, this story seems to be more of an ego trip of the doctor (a prototype of our social reformers?) who is riding high on his generous nature rather than the poor child’s pathetic economic conditions. Against the backdrop of his self-indulgent journey into his past, the little girl’s agony fails to impress the discerning readers.



The story also includes a bit of everyday humor (wife teasing husband for instance) and irreverent comments by friends, intended to establish the environment. Once again, they are irrelevant to the little girl's story and undermine the gravity of her situation.

One of the significant features in a live performance is the delivery of dialogue. In a live performance, the narrator is a ventriloquist. He performs the characters on the stage and the audience will have no problem recognizing which dialogue has been spoken by which character. In "The Ants," (Nayani Krishnakumari. cheemalu), the story is narrated as a series of ponderings in the protagonist's head. They include not only the ponderings of the past events but also his present responses to the past events. In print, in the Telugu original, the sentences have been put in double quotes. In such instances, probably in the English version, italics would be helpful. If this story were narrated in the presence of a live audience, the audience would be able to sense that the protagonist was addressing the other characters only in his mind. In print, this needs further illumination.

Another important element in this story is the use of metaphor. The story revolves round the main character's ego, or, rather his inability to take charge of his life. Ant is a metaphor for a small, insignificant life on one hand and a symbol of communal strength on the other. This story draws on both these aspects. On one hand, the ants as a group could drag a piece of meat, bigger than themselves, into their hole. On the other, the protagonist sees them as his adversaries, the people who dragged him down, and so he would crush them under his foot, a symbolic victory for him. In translation, this again needed further clarification.

Long, meandering sentences with adjectival phrases and nonfinite verbs are very common in Telugu fiction, particularly in the stories written a few decades back. This is interesting in the context of recent trends—courses being taught in short story workshops (Ramulu, pp.20-21), where students are advised to write short sentences.

The first sentence in the "Meaningless Union" (Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma) runs to fourteen lines, filled with adjectival phrases and nonfinite verbs. The text reads roughly as follows:

When Srihari got off the train in Howrah station with a suitcase full of suffocating ideals; saw the buses running in all directions like rows of ants; and, as he walked with renewed enthusiasm at the thought that this is my country, this is our wealth; as he saw the pure, cool, ennobling Ganga river flowing through the heart of the city peacefully, which was shimmering with a touch of the golden rays from the sun, the same Srihari walked ostentatiously, after going around the offices in Garden Reach; as he was worn out after realizing the worthlessness of his recommendation letters; gritted his teeth, ate puffed peas and drank water, trying to fret away all night; caught by the police and beaten with their canes; cursed the system; underwent hardships; went around dragging his suitcase; accepted the "invitation from the Calcutta jute mills"; the city that inhaled people in the morning and exhaled the live corpses in the evening; Srihari moved on, cursing the country.

Apparently, the sentence (paragraph) makes no sense unless rephrased in translation. I moved the last part (the principal sentence) to the beginning of the paragraph for the purpose of lucidity and

also split it into several short sentences. Once again, as in the case of “ A Piece of Ribbon,” this long sentence has not been a problem for Telugu readers.

Unlike the adjectival phrases, a long sentence with several non-finite verbs such as *chuusi* [after seeing or having seen] and *adigi* [after asking or having asked] implies several sequential actions and are often used to bring about a specific effect, a sense of urgency.

One such example to quote is from the story “Madras to Tirupati” (Malathi). The nonfinite verb forms were used to register the impatience of the travelers in a bus. The passengers in the bus were waiting for the driver to start the bus. The driver, instead,

... opened the door, got off the bus, closed the door, walked straight to the tea stall, took out the wallet from his pocket, took some money, put the wallet back in his pocket, bought coffee, drank the coffee, returned the cup, walked back to the bus, took out a matchbox from his pocket, took a beedi, lit the beedi, held it between his teeth tight, opened the bus door, sat in his seat, checked the door one more time to see it was shut tight, and started the engine.

The passengers in the bus were waiting for that moment. They all heaved a long sigh of relief in unison as if it was pre-planned. The narrative is supposed to invoke an imagery of the passengers watching each and every move of the driver. Another notable linguistic variation is the Telugu phrases contain two to three words as opposed to two to eight words in English. It was meant to creating a sense of growing impatience in the passengers. Unlike in the earlier instance, in this case, changing the order of phrases is not necessary.

Flow of thought in Telugu stories is not always consistent with the practice in English. It will be confusing if the story is translated as is. A paragraph from an essay, “non-duality” (Puranam Subrahmanya Sarma) is a case in point.

[An author] Writing the story for whom? For himself or the public? Can he vibrate the world through his writing or is [he] just using [it] to rub his personal woes on the world? Does he understand how strenuous writing a story is? If an author tries only to show off his brains to the world, readers resent him. Readers lose themselves in a good story and get carried away. A story must have a purpose. After finishing the story, a reader must be jolted into thinking—this should be like this or that.

In this passage, several views are stated, sounding disjointed at times. At the risk of repeating myself, I must say that the author’s views are often clear to the readers knowledgeable in our culture. For others, the translator needs to rephrase/reorganize the structure.

To sum up, Telugu story has rich literary history. The narrative technique, including digression and several layers in a given story, the embedded stories, and the linguistic peculiarities, including meandering lines and addressing the readers as if they were present in person—may render the stories hard to follow yet fascinating from the perspective of cultural studies. It will be educational for the readers willing to go to that extra mile and appreciate them for the details the stories provide regarding our culture and lifestyles.

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## WHAT IS A GOOD STORY?

This is a question I have been grappling with for sometime. Before I go into the definition of a good story, let us assume for the sake of argument that different parts of a story appeal to different readers. Secondly, the readers with different cultural backgrounds perceive the same story from yet other perspectives.

For the purpose of this article, I would classify the readers into two categories—the participant and the critical.

The participant readers interact with the story on a personal level, identify themselves with a character, a situation or the conflict in the story and participate in the course of events. Their comments may be simple statements like I've been there, I know what you mean. Or, they dig a little deeper and offer suggestions such as what a given character could have done differently or what else the author could have provided to resolve the conflict. For instance, in “Moral Support” by Anisetty Sridhar, why was Gopalam so stubborn? Why could he not get off his moral high horse and do something to please his wife and parents? Did he not have a moral obligation to his family? At another level, the readers may put some distance between themselves and the story yet react like participants. They see the story as a story, a figment of the author's imagination, and at the same time want more from it. They raise questions like why Gopalam could not see that buying goods at a cheaper rate and selling for profit was neither illegal nor unethical. That is business<sup>101</sup>. That is basically the rule we all are living by in our present day world. For some readers Gopalam's arguments are in tune with his character. For others, it is a flaw in the portrayal of his character.

The critical readers distance themselves further and study the story objectively. They look into the structure, technique, characterization, diction and the message. At times, it is possible for the critical reader to get carried away in his critical thinking and lose sight of the author's purpose.

Taking the earlier example, Gopalam, like all the idealists in real life, lost sight of the realities in life and failed to see the setbacks in his mode of thinking. Whether Gopalam's character was depicted well or not depends on what the reader considers a good characterization. This is only one example of how various views could emanate from the same story.

Let us get back to the topic under discussion. What is a good story? For me, two pieces fell in place automatically—the cultural nuance and the insights as presented by the Telugu elitists. I reviewed some books and articles written by Telugu writers in the past three decades. Based on my readings, the essential components seem to be the same as in the case of world literatures. The list included the opening, the development of a plot or conflict through a series of incidents,

the resolution or the ending, the technique, the message or the author's point of view, characterization, unity or structure, and author's command of language. Using some of these elements as touchstones, I tried to examine some of the stories published on thulika.net.

Broadly speaking, when a person sees or hears about an event, he responds to the scene emotionally and feels a strong, innate urge to relate it to others. That is the motivation to write a story. But how to start it is another story.

The title: Not that authors always start with a title. However, I would like to start with the title since that is what captures the reader's eye at first. The story, "[Diary](#)" (Vasundhara. Kukka) is a good example. The original title in Telugu was "Kukka" [Dog]. For Telugu people, the term "dog" may invoke an image of a sick, stray dog eating garbage on the streets. For the western audience, dog is a domestic animal, man's best friend, and the impression on the reader's mind is not as revolting as that of Indian readers. I wrote to the author, and we both agreed to change it to "Diary" in the English version. The term diary raises curiosity since a diary allows the readers to peek into somebody else's private thoughts. The very first lines tell us that it is a peek into a child's mind. The child's use of dog as a metaphor to make his statement is even more interesting which was the basis for the original title, "Kukka."

The second title that caught my attention is "He is I" (Malladi Ramakrishna Sastry. Soham.). The phrase, soham, taken from the upanishads, refers to an individual identifying himself with the Supreme Soul through a long and rigorous process of contemplation and reflection. The title for this story is open for interpretation. I had a hard time interpreting it and contacted some of my friends, writers and the author's son, Malladi Narasimha Sastri. Narasimha Sastri commented that the title meant, "I am part of God because he stays within me, meaning I love and worship God and when he is within me, I cannot abuse my own body. I must respect myself and in turn respect others"[\[1\]](#).

For some reason, I fail to see the discussion between the young man and the protagonist at end as leading to this realization. The young man's description of his experience at Rattamma's house was left to the reader's imagination. Why did the author leave out this particular, apparently crucial, incident out of his narrative? Was it the author's intent to provoke the reader into thinking? Or, did the author imply we all have our share of the inexplicable in our lives, and we all live at random? Is this a strength or weakness in the story? Yet the story caught my attention only because of the title. Was that the author's plan in choosing this title?

My understanding is, the story opens and ends with the young man and so I assume he is the protagonist. Since most of the story is narrated by the second protagonist, Swamiji, the young man possibly has felt a connection with Swamiji. At the end, after Swamiji returns to his wife, the young man could have said, "That is my story. He is I." The use of first person, reflexive pronoun tanu in the Telugu original is significant. In Telugu, tanu indicates that the views are expressed from the perspective of the speaker, tanu, an equivalent of I. Thus, the connotation appears to be that the story is not about one individual but about exploring a universal truth. The title, an aphorism from the upanishads, also seems to indicate that the drifting away of one person for a while and returning home is a part of male psyche or human nature.

The title “The Drama of Life” (Madhurantakam Rajaram. Jeevana prahasanam) is also open for discussion. Madhurantakam Narendra, the author’s son and a writer in his own right, pointed out that the term prahasanam (part of the original title, “jeevana prahasanam”) meant burlesque or farce as opposed to the term I used.<sup>[3]</sup> I however felt that, if I used the term burlesque or farce, the implicit irony and the satire are apparent for the native speakers but not for the English-speaking audience. I think a term like farce diminishes the intensity particularly because the sarcasm is lost in the translation and for those who are not familiar with the culture, the term drama conveys the gravity of the conflict the performer, Harinarayana Sarma, was grappling with.

Opening scene: Different writers open the story at different points in their narrative. Some stories begin and continue sequentially while others start in the middle or at the end and go back to the beginning.

The opening lines in the “Primeval Song,” (Maharshi. once upon a time) take us to the good old days of oral tradition. It is a song. It is about the mystical and magical times. The first paragraph depicts a luring scene only to highlight how far we have come from that heartening time to the disheartening present.

In “Illusion,” (Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry. Maaya), the story opens with a shrewd, seasoned lawyer lecturing on the stark realities of law practice to a junior lawyer, naive and fresh from law school. The senior lawyer’s crude and abrasive presentation makes the reader want to know what the junior lawyer would discover at the end. In both the stories, the opening scenes set the mood for the reader as in a play. The opening paragraph is a brief statement of what to expect.

The development/unfolding of a plot or conflict: Incidents in a story are like building blocks. Each block reveals a little of the story, building readers’ curiosity, satisfying it partly and then creating more curiosity, keeping him wondering what next. The incidents add to the length of a story, although that is not the purpose. While some stories include only two or three incidents and bring to a close, other stories build the conflict through several incidents, and let the story evolve with a strong base and bring it to a head. Possibly the magnitude of an issue—the central theme—plays a role in the number of incidents the author plans to include. In the longer stories, the incidents contribute immensely towards recreating the milieu. The result is two-fold. For those who are familiar with the culture, it is nostalgic and for those who are not, it helps to appreciate not only the story but also the culture. The more the details are the clearer the setting is. For instance, in the “Primeval Song,” the incidents are straightforward and, actually, traverse the bounds of time and space. A curious baby monkey walks through several experiences only to return to the forest where she finds her home and her identity. The allegory format confirms its primordial nature. It is something readers could relate to anywhere anytime.

In the “Drama of Life” the author recreates the village atmosphere to an astounding degree. The story moves systematically from the villagers’ appreciation of tradition to modern ways, and rearranging their priorities. The story delineates meticulously the scenes in a carefully orchestrated fashion. The very first line tells the readers that it is about a performance. The village chief, Naidu, has been impressed by the moving performance by the traditional narrator, his originality and creativity. Each incident or episode—the description of the village, the

customary celebration of the Mahabharata yajnam, Naidu's zealous references to numerous episodes in the Mahabharatam, and the manner in which he extended his invitation to the performer—is filled with charming minutiae. For me, this was one of the hardest stories to translate. I however thought it was worth the effort since the story provided so much of the life in our villages and the changes that had been taking place in the attitude of people and society.

The first half of the story includes several incidents leading to the conflict. The second set of incidents leads to the denouement or resolution, needed in order to bring about a satisfactory experience in the reader's mind. In "The Drama of Life," the detailed descriptions of several gambling stalls—from the games with small bets to the games with high stakes which are a ruination of the local families, leading to the final catastrophe (breaking the heart of the traditional performer)—serve that purpose.

**The Conflict:** The conflict is the pivotal point in a story. In "The Man Who Never Died," it is the impending death. The protagonist was willing to compromise his values and cut down a 40-year old tree and ruin a 30-year old friendship in the process. Why we fear death and why we would want to live forever are the questions for which we have no answers. But can we do anything to conquer death and live forever? The story illustrates how the fear of death is fed by the people around us.

There is a subplot in "The Man Who Never Died," that is the friendship between Appanna and Markandeyulu. Felling the tree has a symbolic significance for both of them for different reasons though. For Appanna it was a blow to their friendship. For Markandeyulu it was a life-saving event. But their disagreements overlap and Markandeyulu does everything in his power to save Appanna's life. This part of our culture, the interpersonal relationship that defies the caste and class distinction, is rarely presented in Indian fiction, translations or original, outside India. It is also interesting to see that, in this and a few other stories, the illiterate people from the lower strata of our society are presented as instrumental in making the educated persons see the light of the day.

The end wraps up and reveals the author's point of view. That is the simplest statement in any good story. Some readers felt that the ending in "Illusion" was left much to be desired. Bhaskara Rao, Australia, commented that the ending fell flat.[\[4\]](#)

My understanding is that the central theme in the "Illusion" is our botched up court system. The story is about the failed system as perceived by Muthelamma, based on her experience with the courts. The senior lawyer in the opening scene expresses his disillusionment with the system in scathing and unequivocal language, e.g. comparing the lawyers to the foxes hanging in the graveyards. Later Muthelamma, working class, illiterate woman, fires away a volley of questions and even challenges the junior lawyer to prove her wrong. Her speech is considered one of the most powerful speeches in Telugu fiction. The author created a rebel-victim in Muthelamma who was betrayed by the system and who had come to understand that the only way to stay out of jail was to play along. That was the revelation, a poignant point, for the junior lawyer to face. At the end, Muthelamma rises to a level where she could even be patronizing, "You did good. I was there. I saw it. You shook them [the police] up," she tells the junior lawyer. I wonder how many readers smiled at this twist, this reversal of role-playing. To me, it looks like the author has

succeeded in bringing the illusion—what the system claims to do, what it actually does and how the people are betrayed by the system—into bold relief.

At the outset, I mentioned that some readers would ask why the author did not give us more details. My question is, is it necessary to summarize his point of view? Does the author have an obligation to answer all the questions on the topic he had chosen to write about? Would that not erase the difference between an essay and a story? Personally, I feel that it is the author's privilege to decide what he wants to tell and how much.

The story, "[Frostbite](#)" (Malathi. Manchudebba) revolves around the female protagonist's silence. The readers would continue to read the story looking for the reasons for her silence. In that sense, the story ended when she broke her silence. However, the one question that has confounded me at the time and always is why do people hurt others and often for no good reason. So, I continued the story, killed the protagonist in the process, and went on until I could raise the question no more. Perhaps readers can tell if the story should have ended when the protagonist broke the silence.

Among the other elements of a good story are technique, characterization, diction, structure, and the author's perception of the society he is living in. I do not intend to go into all these components but only some that are relevant to my selections for my site.

Satya Pappu, an avid reader, commented that her general response to the stories of Malladi had always been one of satisfaction and contemplation. That kind of satisfaction and contemplation is possible only when the author is skillful in his delivery and the reader allows to lose himself in the flow of the story. Any one element in the story—a character, an incident, the diction, a figure of speech, a proverb, the setting, which is normally ignored or overlooked, can suddenly pop up in the reader's mind and bring about a revelation. It is for this reason, stories that rush to the end without establishing the conflict and resolution sufficiently leave the reader dissatisfied.

The story, "Woman's Wages" is a case in point. The conflict—the disparity between a woman's wages and a man's wages—is the core issue in this short, short story. The protagonist, Naidu, raises the question why the woman should pay the same fare for a ride in a bus as the males when she was not paid the same wages for her labor as a man was paid. And the story ended with the question. For the readers, the unanswered question is what happened next? If I were to develop a story around this incident, probably, I would include a few more incidents. Let us for the moment assume that Naidu protested vehemently, stood in front of the bus, insisted for a fair price for the ticket corresponding to the woman's wages. The passengers naturally would take sides, and the driver would be in a dilemma—whether to make a special allowance for the woman or run over the man in front of the bus. Then we have a story. Then there is a room for the readers to empathize, room for a piece of social history and for a story to go beyond the immediate moment. But, it also looks like I am contradicting myself here. I have stated earlier that it is the author's privilege to tell only what he wants to tell and how much.

Narration: The story "He is I" was a difficult one to translate for me due to its complex structure. There are two narrators besides the author. The story opens with tanu but most of the story was narrated by Swamiji. At times, it was also presented as a conversation between these two



characters; Swamiji narrated the story to tanu, the young man. At times, the author narrated the story, referring to the other two as they. There are also instances where the actual incident was left to the imagination of the reader. For instance, the young man's experience in Rattamma's house was not described in detail. Swamiji's comments seem to indicate that the young man had the experience Swamiji had been craving for. Or, was it only the Swamiji's interpretation of the young man's unrecorded account?

I showed my translation to some of my American friends. To my surprise, they were not as baffled as I was. Is it possible I was reading too much into the story because of my cultural background? Or, was it the author's intention to force the readers to see that we do not get all the answers always, and that we live at random?

**Characterization:** Creating believable characters is part of good writing. Depicting a character does not necessarily mean providing a physical description of the character. Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry is highly regarded for his character portrayal, particularly, strong female characters. The story, "Moments before Boarding the Plane", is developed with extraordinary flair in the form of a dialogue between a queen and a chief in her husband's court. The chief, because of his long-standing association with the family, becomes a friend, confidante, protector and acts almost like a brother to the queen. They address each other as brother and sister. The dialogues written in simple, everyday language of the ordinary people, and are simply captivating. The important factor here is that the reader would have to imagine the characters only from their dialogues carried out in second person.

This kind of characterization however is not common. Often, readers envisage the characters from their actions, author's description of them, and the comments made by other characters. The incidents and characterization are interdependent.

**Technique:** Each writer develops his own technique. In a way, the writer is the technique as far as his writing goes. In addition to the elements discussed so far, the technique includes idiom, the author's knowledge of his own culture, his awareness of the societal norms, and his ability to pull them together to make that one indelible impression on the reader's mind.

Most readers can identify a writer from his style. Style is one of the elements that does not lend itself for translation easily. For instance, here is a line from "[Marigolds](#)".

buddideepam cheta pucchuku aa guddivelugulo chukkallaati kallato bikkubikkumantoo choostondi Kamalabala.

The closest translation I could come up with is "She sat there, with her starry eyes, flickering furtively in the dim light from the wick lamp she was holding, slouched over the flower bed and kept staring at them.."

The original lines are poetic. The alliteration is striking. The translation is pale compared to the original. The poetic quality is lost. The word count in the translation is three times the original, which speaks for the author's skill. It is this poetic quality in his stories that will not allow the reader to skip lines and rush to the end.

Another example of a unique style is the references to the stage performers of the mid-twentieth century in the story, “He is I.” For those native speakers who had enjoyed stage plays in the past, the references are gratifying. Swamiji says, “she [his wife] is like Purushottam in his role as Chitrangi on the stage.” This analogy is strange to me. Purushottam was a male actor, who apparently was known for his female roles. Did the author intentionally compare his wife to a male actor playing a female role? Did the author expect the reader to take it as his observation of the male psyche? Human nature? Or, was it meant to show the author’s appreciation of the performer?

Notably, writers would like to draw such parallels whenever the occasion supports it, and in an attempt to evoke the nuance in the mind of the readers. Would the stories read the same without these references to the classics and performing artists? For the native speakers, it is a bonding experience. For foreigners, probably, the story is easier to follow without these references. However, these details do serve a purpose; they provide an opportunity to understand the culture a little better.

Author’s point of view: Whenever a story is written, a point of view is expressed. What specifically that point of view is a moot point. As mentioned at the beginning, different readers relate to different aspects in the story and different critics see different viewpoints. The story “[Choices](#)” (Chaganti Somayajulu. empu) provides a platform for different viewpoints.

The story was first published in 1945. At the time, most of the literature was focused on the middle class issues—the hopes, the dreams, the aspirations, the fears and frustrations of the middle class at the time. When the working class characters were depicted, they were depicted as victims of either the system or the centuries old tradition, which meant depicting only stereotypical images. The author, Somayajulu depicted the hopes, the dreams, and the family values of the beggar community, that they would not be any different from the other human beings in the upper classes. Daskhinamurthy, a noted writer and critic, commented that, “Their [the beggars’] philosophy was that all the beggar girls must invariably look for and find only blind men to marry”(498).

Chaganti Tulasi, the author’s daughter and a well-known writer, offered the following explanation: “The story, “Empu” was published in ARASAM special issue, September 1945, and that was 58 years ago. But the situation of arranging a marriage for one’s daughter has not changed much. Though ChaSo [the author] took his characters and life from beggars it is about the fundamentals of economics of all communities, rich and poor alike. The richest man’s philosophy is also the philosophy of the poorest. Chaso wrote a small keynote sentence in the story - musilaadi upanyaasam mushti lokaaaniki upanishattu [The old man’s speech is an upanishad for the beggars’ community]. Here mushti lokam has an inner meaning besides the meaning ‘the beggars world.’ The word mushti is used as a derogative term for the entire human community. In your translation, the second meaning has not been conveyed. It tells about the panhandlers community only. Fathers, daughters, would-be son-in-laws are all alike in all communities.”[\[5\]](#)

Themes: Themes include all the aspects discussed so far. Therefore, there is not much to say about it. I agree that a good writer can write a story almost about anything. However for the

purpose of my website, I am looking for themes which are commonly ignored or overlooked, stories that throw light on cultural peculiarities, and stories that deal with human nature unique to Telugu people.

Language: Diction is illustrative of the author's command of figures of speech, knowledge of traditional values, symbols, epithets, proverbs and the ability to suffuse the story with native flavor.

Sripada Subrahmanya Sastry and Racakonda Viswanatha Sastry are often quoted as two writers who could present dialogues with the sharpness of a knife (Dakshinamurthy. 339). A famous poet, Sri Sri. stated that Muthelamma's speech in the story "Illusion" belonged in the world's greatest literatures.<sup>[6]</sup> Metaphors and proverbs are powerful ingredients of our socio-cultural history. Most of our writers draw on the characters from ancient literature for what the characters stand for in the perception of the public. A writer need not believe in the Lord Rama as god to use the name as a symbol for an ideal man. In the story, "[Reform](#)", the author, known for her Marxist ideology, describes the state of mind of the couple at the end as "two persons lost in dharma yuddham." The phrase dharma yuddham refers to the Great War in the epic Mahabharata fought in the name of justice. The reference invokes an image in the reader's mind of a battle fought for a just cause and lost.

On a different note, I need to mention the comments I have received from my American friends. One of them said that the long names were like roadblocks; they would not let the reader move forward freely. I am aware that foreign names are hard to remember for any reader and long names are the hardest. However, the names are part of characterization. They add considerably to the narrative. Unlike parents, the writers are in a position to give names suitable for their characters.

Finally, please note that this article is not an attempt to offer guidelines for writing a good story but to bring up some of the topics for discussion and to show what I am looking for in my selections for stories on my web site, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net). I have tried to point out what captures my imagination and by extension what I like to publish on my website. I hope to publish more stories by more writers rather than more stories of one writer and, thereby, create an awareness of the widest range of Telugu culture among English-speaking audience.

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## TELUGU HUMOR and FAMILY VALUES

Before I discuss three most celebrated humor writers in modern Telugu literature, let me indulge in a personal story. Sometimes I try to impress my daughter, who is born and raised in America, with our Telugu humor. I tell her a Telugu joke and she laughs, hehehe. I doubt if she got it. So, I ask her, “Are you laughing because you found it funny or because I thought it was funny.” She turns to me, squints, “both.”

Humor has its time and place. What is funny for us Telugu people may not be funny for others. As they say in America, if you slip on a banana peel, it is a tragedy but if someone else slips and falls, it is hilarious. That is not the case in Telugu homes, not until sixties at least. We laugh at ourselves much the same way as at others.

In the twentieth century, there are three literary giants in Telugu humor writing. They are Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao, Mullapudi Venkataramana and Bhanumati Ramakrishna, I have grown up with. By mid-forties, Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao was already an established writer, Mullapudi Venkataramana started making his name in the early fifties. Chronologically, Bhanumati Ramakrishna was a contemporary of Venkataramana but started writing fiction in the sixties. All the three writers showcased the laughter in Telugu homes as never before.

Bhanumati mentioned that she was inspired by Narasimha Rao’s *Kantham kathalu* (Stories of Kantham, the narrator’s wife), published in 1944. She also mentioned that Mullapudi Venkataramana had encouraged her. Interestingly, Mullapudi Venkataramana dedicated his anthology of short stories, *Radha and Gopalam* (1965), to Bhanumati Ramakrishna. Her *Attagari Kathalu* was published in 1966.

Regarding themes, I am not aware if Narasimha Rao had written about any topics other than familial relationships. Bhanumati wrote a few stories, about five or six I believe, depicting tragic situations in life. Mullapudi Venkataramana had written about almost every aspect - politics, society, entertainment (movies), and children, and also critiques. His latest work is an autobiographical work, *kothi kommachi* in his own style.

In the anthology, “*Kantham stories*” (Munimanikyam Narasimha Rao. *Kantham kathalu*), a middle-aged couple and the ordinary, everyday incidents in their lives are portrayed. One of the story, *nenu, Kantham* (Kantham and I) illustrates the husband’s miserable experience with eating out and wife’s savvy handling of the situation. Most of the humor comes from the narrator’s descriptions of his self-styled ego.

Humor in Kantham's story comes from everyday events and interaction between husband and wife. They do care about each other, yet the husband could not take the apparent disrespect from his wife. To me it seems to be a social comment on the irrational behavior of men and their ego trips.

While in "Kantham and I", the narrator was depicted as being an egotist, conscious of his status as husband, in "Radha and Gopalam", the husband and wife behave like friends, teasing each other for the fun of it. This change in the attitudes of the couples is notable; it reflects the change that has taken place from the previous generation to the current generation in familial relationships in the society.

Mullapudi Venkataramana has successfully created humorous instances using "debt" as core theme in several stories, including a series, "Runaananda lahari", in which his play upon words is matchless. In the story under discussion, "Radha's debt", Gopalam surprises his wife by asking her to pay back a loan she had never promised, much less aware that she owed him money. Soon enough she turns around, catches up with him, and proves he owed her too. The theme is frivolous on the surface. To me, the story reflects the amicable relationship between husband and wife.

In "Radha's debt", (Mullapudi Venkataramana. Radhamma baki) the couple, Radha and Gopalam, are newlyweds, and between the two, Radha is the level-headed one. Gopalam acts like a juvenile. Gopalam's insistence that Radha owed him for the expenses he had incurred to get her attention before their marriage itself is humorous.

"A Story of a mother-in-law and a daughter-in-law" (Bhanumati. attaakodaleeyam) is woven around attagaru (mother-in-law) with kodalu (daughter-in-law) as a sidekick. Attagaru is a charming, naive, traditional woman who is also a busybody, which often lands her in trouble. Kodalu, the narrator, is also traditional in that she is respectful towards her husband and his mother (the mother-in-law), and steps in only when her services as a mediator/arbitrator are needed. She appears to be enjoying a private joke of her own in the process though. She never talks back, never offers to take matters into her own hand unless and until it becomes absolutely necessary. In the story under reference, they plan a trip to Lord Venkateswara in Tirupati. During the trip the car breaks down, they end up in the home of a relative, attagaru is not fond of, and arrange a wedding by the end of their trip. The author succeeds in making each of the incidents hilarious.

The incongruities in our actions and the eccentricities in human nature are great stuff for humor. And, our beliefs and gods are no exception for a good laugh as you'll see in some of the irreverent comments in Bhanumati's story.

Like any other custom or tradition, humor in a given culture develops from its own environment. In that, demographics do play a huge role. When several members of a family—aged parents, sons and daughters-in-law and grandchildren—are thrown in together under one roof (Brady Bunch style), good sense of humor becomes a part of skills for coexistence, peaceful or not. In Telugu homes, we tease each other, poke fun at each other, and call each other names; and at the end of the day, all is well; no offense intended, none taken.

Secondly, with the progress of civilization, the code of conduct has put a rigid barrier between people and clouded our sense of humor to a certain degree, I think. But if one wants to have good hearty laugh, one must be prepared to laugh and be laughed at with equal ease. That is a prerequisite to foster one's sense of humor. These stories illustrate this point.

Bhanumati was the first female writer to write humor fiction in the sixties, and earn a permanent place in the history of Telugu literature. Apart from her unparalleled stature in the movie industry, she made her mark as a writer of humor fiction with just under three dozen or so.

Bhanumati has written a few serious stories also but her humor stories revolving around attagaru, a mother-in-law, is the one that has become the hallmark of her writing. While almost every critic would agree that Bhanumati's creation of the mother-in-law character is unique, it is often left just at that.

It may sound illogical but humor fiction is not taken seriously. More often than not, the message is lost between the laughs, the stories invoke. Bhanumati's stories belong in that category. Her mother-in-law stories reflect her belief in tradition and family values. Her stories brim with her belief in god, astrology, and a host of others

Bhanumati draws her humor primarily from situations and the idiosyncrasies of people in their everyday lives. And she never missed a chance to take a jab at our customs and beliefs, which however is not to be interpreted as disrespect for tradition.

Bhanumati's talent in creating humorous situations speaks of her keen eye for the incongruities in human behavior. One good example is well portrayed in her "Attagaru - avakaya" (Attagaru and pickles).

In general, attagaru does not let anyone see her food plate; she sits on the floor facing the wall, with her back to the rest of the world. "The only way one could know what she was eating was to jump out of the wall in front of her, like Lord Narasimha," the narrator comments.

For those who are not familiar with the reference, lord Narasimha was one of the ten incarnations; he jumped out of a pillar to prove his existence to a non-believer demon king Hiranyakasipu. The parallel is a stretch but the point is the overextended shield her mother-in-law would create at the time of eating her supper in the name of madi—a custom in Brahmin families.

The narrator continues to describe a second instance, the family members will know what she is eating; that is when she moved the pickles jar:

"The smell from her pickles extended beyond the kitchen walls and into the living room. ... One day, my husband sat down to eat, along with atta garu.

She moved the pickles jar; and the smells exploded and filled the entire house."

The husband blames it on the narrator and her incompetence as a housewife.

“Huh! What’s that smell? Is it the oranges’ gone bad? Maybe not, uh, what a stench! Maybe the maid didn’t clean the area after washing the dishes,” my husband started yelling. Then he turned to me and said with a grimace, “Didn’t you notice that? What’re you doing sitting at home all day? Can’t you take care of the cleaning, at least?”

I was nearly dead by the time I had finished explaining to him that he was wrong in his assumption about the smell. (Bhanumati kathanikalu)

Taken out of context, the husband’s comment could ruffle a few women. In Bhanumati’s story, the narrator was the one to have the last laugh; readers might even see a wink and a nod from her husband. Let us not forget that he was ridiculing his mother’s pickles.

The incongruities in our actions and the eccentricities in human nature are great stuff for humor. And, our beliefs and gods are no exception for a good laugh as we can see in some of the irreverent comments in the above story. A few common phrases such as apachaaram [sacrilege] are used sometimes seriously and at other times flippantly to make fun of those who take it a little too seriously. Bhanumati makes best use of this practice. and “tapping on one’s own cheeks” as a way of offering an apology (lempalu vesukonu, lempalesukonu) is another phrase used in her stories. In other words, even gods and the sanctity surrounding gods are no exception in the realm of humor. Another example is attagaru’s reference to the Lord Venkateswara as Venkanna (nickname) and comparing him to a neighbor in physical appearance and make up.

Bhanumati used laughter itself as core theme in two stories, which are serious in nature. In jeevitamlo agaathaalu [The Depth of Darkness in Life] and telivitetala viluvalu [Value of Wits], both the protagonists, Rambabu and Rao, laugh incessantly, much to the dismay of the narrator.

In the first story, jeevitamlo agaathaalu, the reader would come to know at the end that Rambabu was laughing to hide his pain; his wife was a hysteria patient and there was nothing he could do about it. In the second story, Rao would laugh incessantly but in this case it was a matter of habit. Additionally, in the latter story, the narrator’s husband and Rao call each other “fool” and neither was offended by this name calling. The story ended with the narrator commenting, “I stood there watching those two fools.”

Bhanumati’s respect for tradition is evident in her use of the proper names. In our homes, people are often referred to by relational terminology—somebody’s son, somebody’s daughter-in-law, and somebody’s daughter-in-law’s daughter-in-law; and this is true even when two persons are cousins, two or three times removed.

As all of us, Telugu people, Bhanumati would not mind laughing at herself. In her story, pedda aakaaraalu, chinna vikaaraalu [Big people and small idiosyncrasies], she gives a hilarious description of her fear of lizards:

Bhanumati also, like Naraasimha Rao, creates hilarious scenes from everyday life; but, unlike Narasimha Rao, she narrates them while remaining complacent. Secondly, unlike the narrator in Kantham stories, the narrator in attagaru stories stays in control. We do not see her laughing but

on rare occasions, the “I” of these stories seem to enjoy a private joke of her own while playing the innocent bystander.

A brief note on the names is in order here. Proper names are often abbreviated. More importantly, the relational terminology is used in place of proper names, which could be confusing for non-native speakers, or when the same term is used with reference to more than one person.

For instance, in “Attaa-kodaleeyam” there were three daughters-in-law and a son (the original attagaru’s son and the husband of the narrator/kodalu). Mother refers to him as abbayi (by attagaru), and the narrator refers to him as maavaaru (meaning ‘my husband’ but his real name was never given in the story. In fact, in this particular story, all the characters were referred to only in relation to each other, even when they were cousins two or three times removed. (See glossary under relational terminology for further clarification).

This usage of relational terminology in the case of distant relatives could be a way of bringing them together and of reinforcing family values. For the purpose of clarification in this discussion, I decided to leave ‘attagaru’ as is, she being the protagonist. The story is narrated in first person by kodalu (daughter-in-law) and, I used ‘kodalu’ as a proper name for her. Her co-daughter-in-law (todikodalu) and her daughter-in-law (kodalu of todikodalu) also figure in to the story. (Bhanumati used the comic side of the relational terminology as her theme in another story, vavi varasalu).

Another angle to the proper names, as a form of address, is “calling each other names”. Bhanumati takes it to a new level in her story, telivitetala viluvalu [The Worth of Intellect]. The title seem to be a little off base. The core theme is the form of address as used by two friends, (narrator’s husband and his friend, Rao) to address each other as ‘fool’ and laugh at each other. Rao’s son-in-law gets involved in a scooter accident and Rao tells the narrator about the accident with a big laugh; and again when the narrator and her husband to go to the hospital to visit the son-in-law, the two friends talk about the accident, laughing and calling each other, “fool”. The narrator stands there “watching the two fools”.

In “Radha-Gopalam”, the author gives the characters acceptable proper names. Additionally, he uses a few perfectly legitimate proper names like Ramanatham or Gurunatham as punch lines. Further discussion of this is given in the story.

In “Nenu-Kantham”, the husband is the narrator; his real name is never mentioned.

Second person singular pronoun has two forms in Telugu, meeru and nuvvu. Within a family, seniors who’re respected (father, grandfather, for instance) are addressed as ‘meeru’. This is not a hard and fast rule though. Kodalu always addresses attagaru as ‘meeru’ and attagaru addresses kodalu as ‘nuvvu’. Wife addresses husband as ‘meeru’ and husband addresses wife as ‘nuvvu’. This protocol is maintained in the stories of the fifties and sixties. The peculiar part however is, a kodalu (the co-daughter-in-law in “attaa - kodaleeyam) or a wife (in Radha - Gopalam) may address the other person as ‘meeru’ and still engage in a lively banter, which may or may not be amiable, and adding one more shade of humor to it.



Regarding technique, the three stories present ordinary events in a humorous light. In *Kantham* story, the narrative is tight: it opens with a husband upset with his wife; he refuses to eat at home to punish his wife; and the punishment turns out to be his, yet he acts like he has the upper hand. It is not easy to create humor in such a negative atmosphere. The story is told in a straight forward manner, no unexpected twists and no shock value incidents. Narasimha Rao succeeds in bringing the funny side up, that's the strength of an established humor writer.

In the *Mother-in-law* story, there is more than one plot. The story opens with a proposed pilgrimage to Tirupati by car, and as usual, the two main characters—mother-in-law and daughter-in-law—are thrown in together to the exclusion of the son/husband. The second plot includes a second daughter-in-law (*todikodalu*). I think Bhanumati did this on purpose. In general, the daughter-in-law's relationship with her mother-in-law is not confrontational in any of her stories under the running title, *attagaari kathalu*. Thus the author may have created the second daughter-in-law to reflect another side, a more common notion, a kind of love-hate relationship. They both get into heated arguments in one moment and are affable in the next moment. Notably the narrator (*kodalu*) herself never talked back to the mother-in-law and the mother-in-law never put down the daughter-in-law in this story or in any other story. And then, there is one more subplot, the arranged marriage; arranged by the mother-in-law and the second daughter-in-law in between their heated arguments and boisterous laughter. The narrator however does not lose touch with reality. The reality is "The two women are going to meet like two rival planets on a combat zone in the month of *magham*." In a way, three plots make the story less tight, compared to the *Kantham* story, but entertaining all the same.

The story is, as indicated by the title, about relationship between *atta* and *kodalu*. The incidents follow in a lighter vein. The story of *Radha and Gopalam* takes this idea of a theme narrated in a lighter vein further. In fact, it is a story about sweet nothings. The underlying message is the secret of marital bliss. As long as a couple can laugh together, and at each other without malice, there is no cause for complaint in a marriage. All's well that ends well. Most of the humor in this story, unlike the other two, comes from its language and adolescent behavior of the couple.

Most of the humor in Telugu stories comes from teasing, self-deprecation, and word play. Readers foreign to our culture may make an effort to understand teasing and self-deprecation as part of the culture, word play is hard to carry in to the translation. Stories like "*Radha's debt*" are not translatable, "*Mother-in-law's story*" is a stretch, and, "*Kantham and I*" is comparatively easy to translate. It is important readers make a note of it.

## BILINGUALISM IN ANDHRA PRADESH: IS IT AN IMPOSSIBLE CONCEPT?

This article is inspired by a couple of emails I have received after I published my story, “Bilingual Kid” on my site [<http://www.thulika.net/bilingual.html>]. My story was about a tutor who, while teaching English as Second Language to a non-native speaker, would suggest that the kid should stop speaking his mother tongue even at home.

I received emails from a young woman who had attended in English medium school in Andhra Pradesh informing me of the humiliations and punishments she had been subjected to. That was an education for me. Having been away from the country for over 36 years, I was not aware of the craziness in the English medium schools until now.

Then I started looking harder at the issue. Much to my surprise, some of the professors in a local college pointed out to me that the English teaching methods/policies put in place in America in the early 1900’s. I learned that the BIA [Bureau of Indian Affairs] started schools to teach American Indian [Native American] children with the sole purpose of “civilizing” and “assimilation” of the children of the native tribes [American Indians] into the white world. Simply stated, it was meant to make young American Indian children to accept the white men’s beliefs and value systems. Their stated policies included uniforms appropriate for the white men’s world and punishing the children, if they spoke their native tongue.([http://www.aiefprograms.org/history\\_facts/history.html](http://www.aiefprograms.org/history_facts/history.html) for full text).

Despite the apparent similarities, there is a difference. In America, the dissension was between two races, the white America and the American Indians. In Andhra Pradesh, it is one race—the Andhra people. The imposition of English on Telugu children in Andhra Pradesh schools did not come from outside. We are doing to our own children. To me, that is unconscionable!

During my visits to Andhra Pradesh, I have noticed Americanization in every aspect—toys, textbooks, teaching methods, attitudes, clothing, electronics, aspirations, pursuits, careers, not to mention the language, which is a curious mix of Telugu with heavily accented Indian English ...

Until now, I prided myself on the fact that in my country even the illiterate could speak two or three languages at functional level at least. Most of our writers in my generation were knowledgeable in three or four languages. The situation is quite different now. The illiterate like auto rickshaw drivers can speak two or three languages while the children in the schools are being taught to speak only one language and that is English!

During my Intermediate years [two-year, pre-degree course] I opted to learn Sanskrit. The teacher was a scholar who had studied Sanskrit through traditional learning and thus his English learning was minimal. Therefore, he taught us Sanskrit in Telugu medium. However, since English was the medium of instruction, we were required to write the exam in English. In other words, the language I was learning was Sanskrit, the medium in which we were taught Sanskrit was Telugu, and our expertise in Sanskrit was tested in English! And, none of us questioned the propriety of this system, nor were we outraged, much less complained. Today I am glad I took that class and happy I know some Sanskrit at least.

Having said that let me refer back to the article on BIA schools. The Bureau and the parents eventually realized that it would not work and decided to revise their policy. In 1926, the Meriam Report's recommendations included among several others:

Do away with "The Uniform Course of Study," which stressed only the cultural values of whites.

The Indian Service must provide youth and parents with tools to adapt to both the white and Indian world.

"The Depression had finally benefited Indian people, not because of their unique plight, but because they were at last a part of a national plight. ... Indian education should be rooted in the community and should stress the values of native culture," commented the author. "Children learned through the medium of their own cultural values while becoming aware of the values of white civilization. ... [American] Indian schools introduced Indian history, art, and language," he further elaborated.

After I finished reading the article quoted above, I started wondering what does it take for the school administrators, parents, the elite, and the government of Andhra Pradesh to realize that they can teach children the English language along with their mother tongue Telugu, which is also state's official language, and not to the exclusion of?

(Later I realized that this article has been copied and posted on other sites. It would appear that on rare occasions, stories provoke people into thinking!)

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Malathi Nidadavolu, originally from Visakhapatnam, Andhra Pradesh, India, moved to America in 1973. She has been writing fiction in Telugu since early fifties. After arriving in America, she continues to write in Telugu and English.

Malathi has Masters' in English Language and Literature, and in Library and Information Sciences. She taught Telugu at UW-Madison, Wisconsin for over 15 years. Currently working full-time on her writing original fiction and analytical articles, translating and managing her website and blogs.

### Website and blogs:

In June 2001, Malathi started her website, [www.thulika.net](http://www.thulika.net) where she translates and publishes eminent Telugu fiction and analytical essays. The web site has been quoted as a useful source for researchers and students of multicultural studies by several academic institutions.

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<http://englishthulika.wordpress.com>, featuring her original stories and articles in English.

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Malathi is grateful to her father Jagannatha Rao and mother Seshamma who had been her mentors and greatest influences in defining her values. She has one daughter, Sarayu Rao, who has earned her Master's in Fine Arts and currently pursuing acting career in Hollywood.